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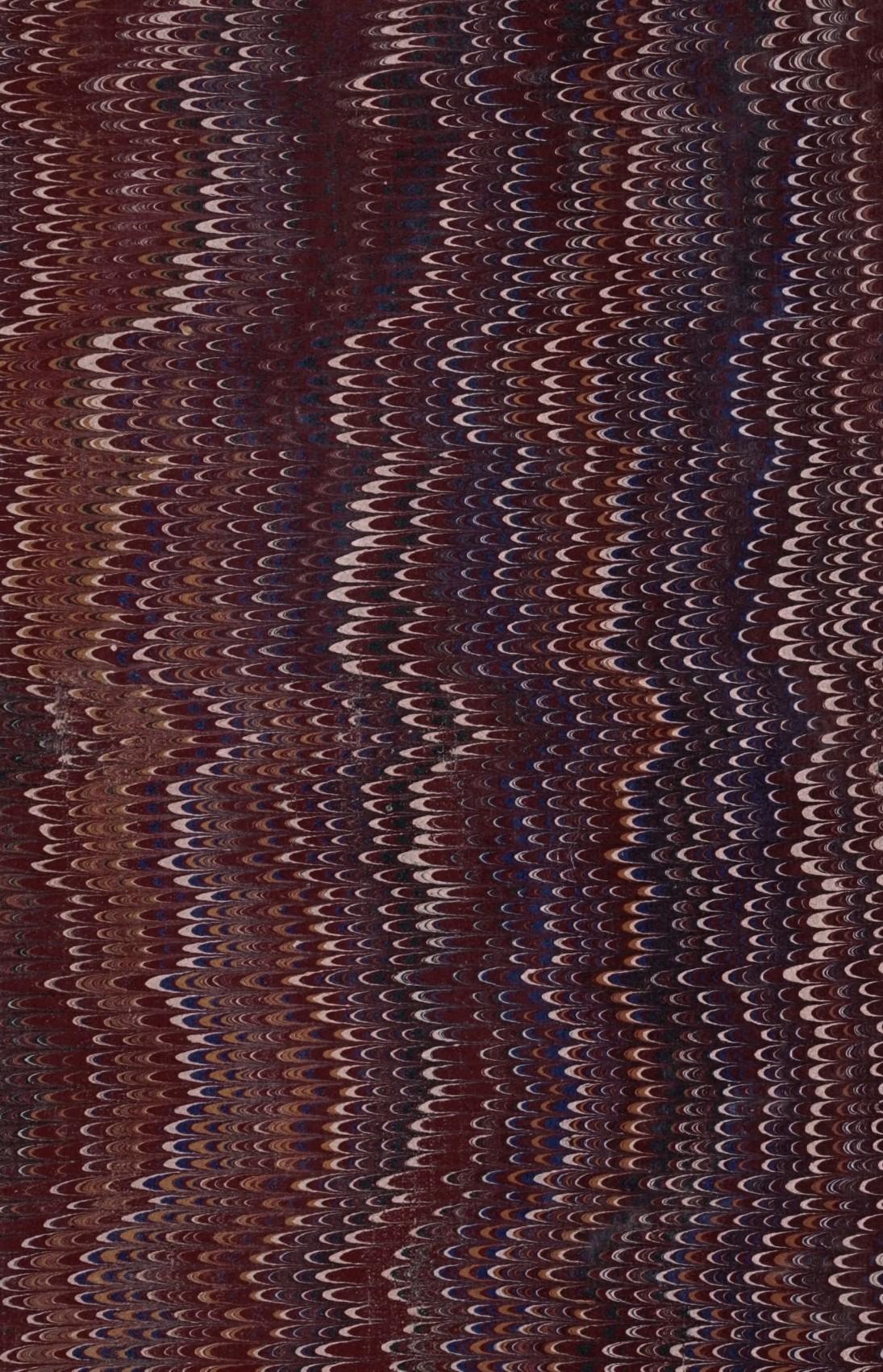
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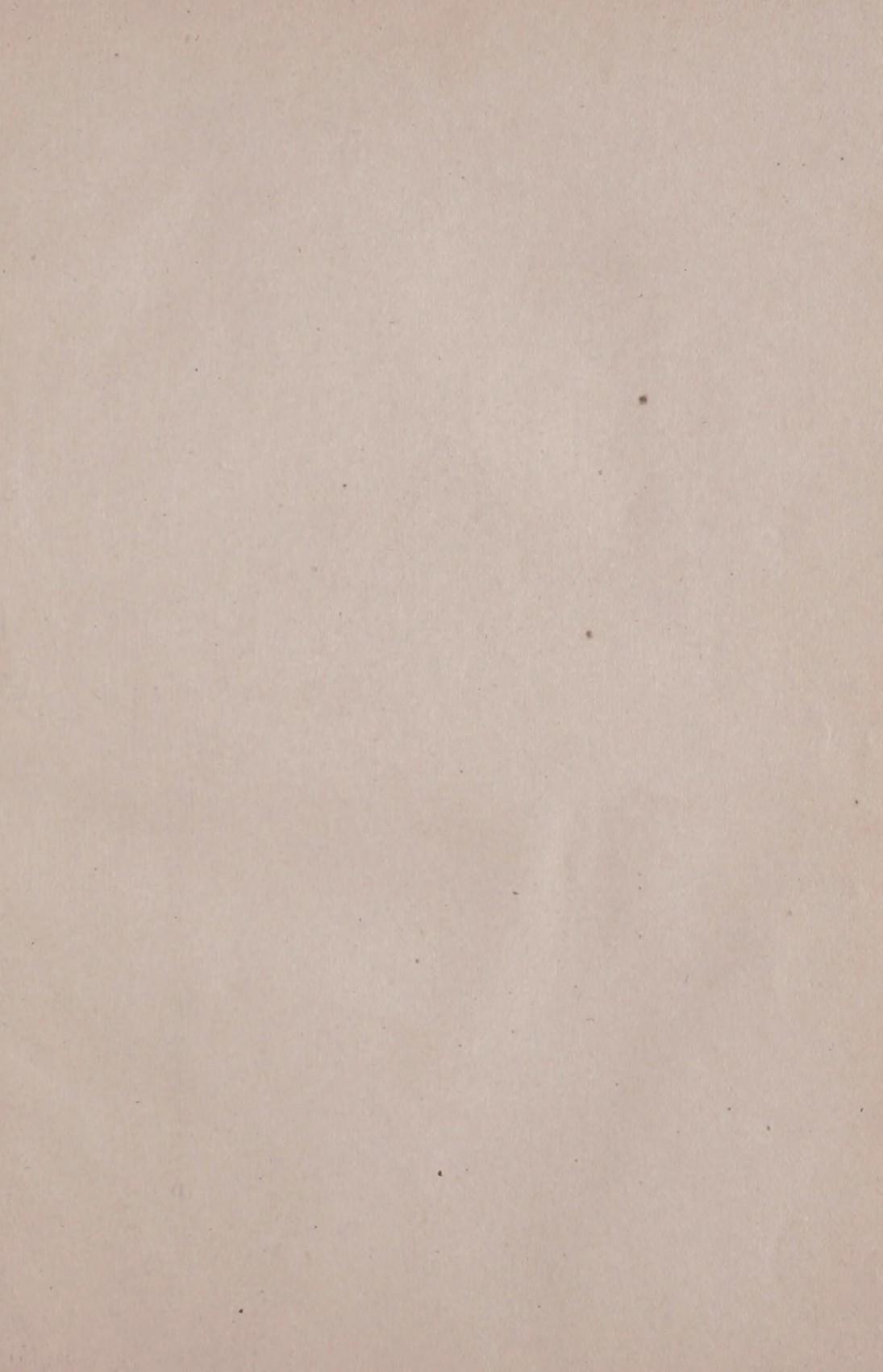
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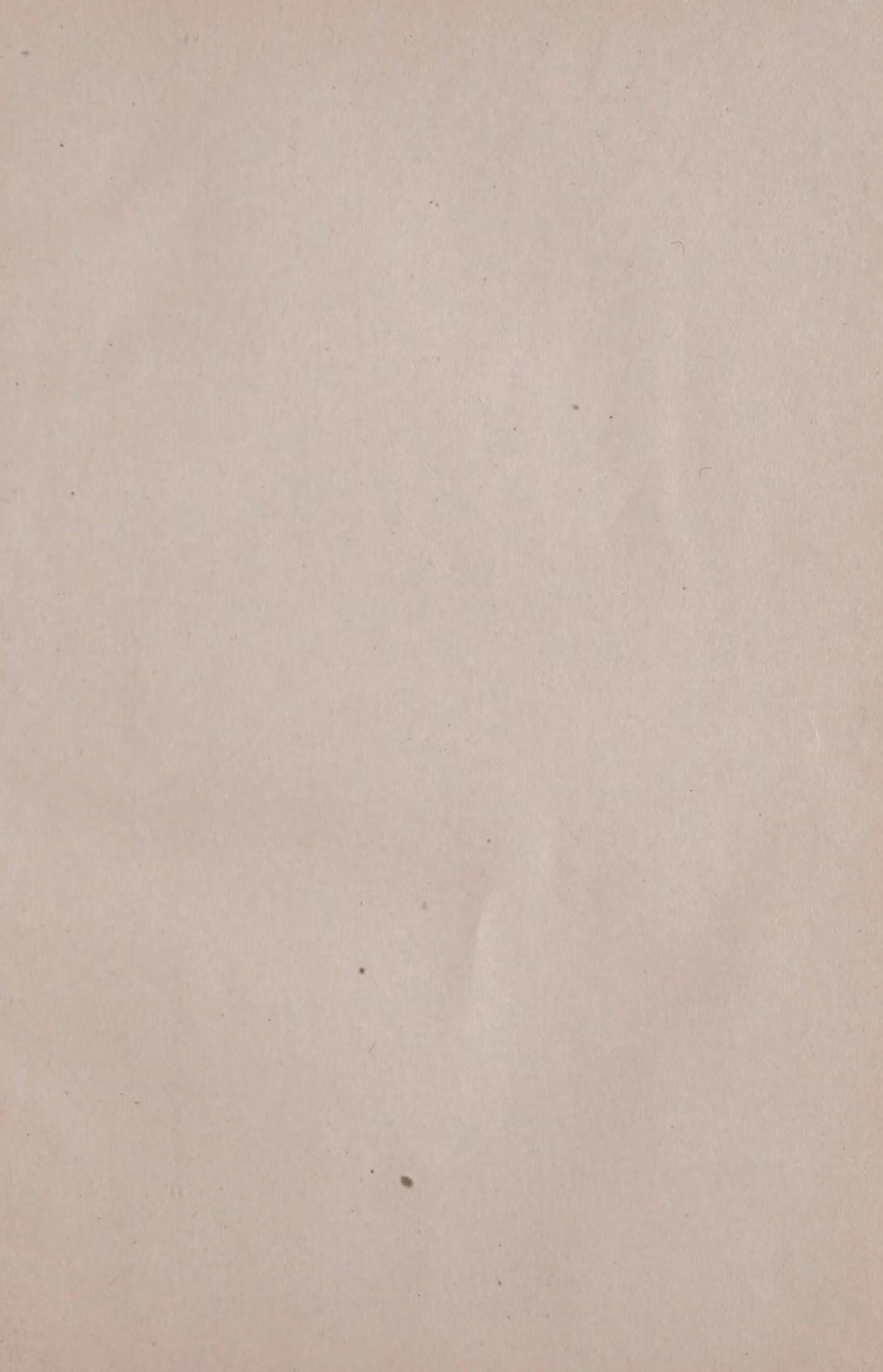
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IN AN EVIL HOUR

AND

OTHER STORIES.

By "THE DUCHESS."

Margaret Hamilton H. Ingerford
formerly Mrs. Broiles



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IN AN EVIL HOUR.

ALL his world was openly astonished when it heard that old Grantham had given his pretty daughter to Geoffrey Carden—a man grave to a fault, and not so many years her father's junior. He was a widower; he was forty; at all events he was thirty-eight; of a nature so calm, so undemonstrative, that he seemed the last, one would have thought, to give his life into the keeping of a baby like Susie Grantham!—a pretty creature, who, though she might be nineteen in reality, looked barely sixteen, and was as light-hearted as a kitten. She looked indeed absurdly young for her age. “A gigantic fraud,” she called herself, which used to make her father laugh, she was such a bit of a thing.

Carden’s extreme gravity arose no doubt from the fact that his past had been a singularly unhappy one. He had married when very young a woman of the worst type, if in a good social position, and time had developed her into a dishonest creature, who finally gave herself up a prey to drink, and who died, after many years, in an obscure German village. This tragic story gave a melancholy color to his expression, that to some appeared as sternness, but it did not prevent his falling passionately, boyishly, in love with Susie.

He was an unusually rich man, and Mr. Grantham, who had known him for years and had cause to respect him, was pleased when he declared himself a suitor for his daughter's hand. She was his only child, yet it seemed to him then that he could desire nothing better for her. As for Susie herself, she accepted the matrimonial scheme with charming *insouciance*, being without much thought for such matters. She grew so accustomed to Mr. Carden's perpetual visits, and was always so delighted with the bonbons and trinkets and other pretty things he lavished upon her, especially the bonbons, that she became quite fond of him before the final proposal was made, and accepted him without a fear. A husband she plainly regarded in the light of an appendage as necessary as her terrier, though it must be confessed she spent far more time over the selection of the latter.

All the elderly maiden relatives on both sides were much exercised as to how this strange marriage would succeed. For the first three months it worked wonderfully well. Carden's brow lost a good deal of its gravity, and Susie, instead of growing more sedate, became positively younger.

"She was altogether *too* absurd!" said the elderly ones in chorus, and a second cousin, stronger-minded than the rest, insisted on Mr. Carden's buying a velvet gown of a good dark shade, and a matronly bonnet that suited *her*—the cousin. From these, great things were expected; but, alas! when Susie stood in them, hope fell dead. She looked indeed lovely, but grotesque. She was for all the world like a little girl who had found some clothes of grandma's, and had put them on with a view to looking

grown-up. She was exquisite, but more than ever a baby.

Her father roared with laughter when he saw her in the bonnet, and Carden insisted on her giving it up. It made her ten, he said, and him a hundred; so, perforce, Susie (who had a sneaking affection for it) put it away. She took out the mounting feathers, lowered the pride of the bows, turned it upside down and lined it with cotton-wool; tied the strings into a fanciful knot, and, slinging it across her arm, put her two white mice into it and called it a cradle.

She had a special fancy for the park, and every evening during May and June might be seen there sitting in her carriage with the terrier, Chin-chin, beside her. On occasions such as these Chin-chin was solemnity itself, and as he sat on the cushion on her left hand very erect, with his ears stiff and his eyes glancing indignantly around in search of the foe, he looked a very dragon of a chaperon. Mrs. Carden was not fond of girl companions, having been brought up entirely without them; and as the spinsters before mentioned were, to say the least of it, trying, she preferred to drive alone.

One exquisite evening toward the close of May she and Chin-chin were driving slowly there, up and down amongst the other carriages. The rhododendrons were in full bloom, and many other flowers made gay the beds. So sweet indeed was the breath of the many blossoms that almost one forgot the smoke and turmoil of town that lay but a few yards away, and began to believe that the real country had been reached at last.

Presently there was a slight turning of heads and a whisper that the princess was coming; then a little block amongst the carriages. Susie, who was in the line next the railings, feeling herself come to a standstill, raised her eyes, and let them wander incuriously over the many loungers near her. After a moment or two a strange sense of discomfort took possession of her. She felt restless, embarrassed; and then, as if impelled to it, turned her glance a little to the right. There she met full the admiring gaze of a pair of handsome blue eyes.

She blushed warmly in spite of herself, and—just a degree too late to prevent the blush being seen—changed her position. She could no longer be vexed by that earnest regard, but unfortunately she was not able to forget that she *had* seen it. There grew upon her an uncomfortable feeling that those blue eyes were still fixed on her, though now they could see nothing but the soft updrawing of the hair at the back of her head. And though she had told herself that the owner of them was rude beyond pardon, that did not enable her to put him out of her thoughts. Mingled with all this annoyance was a nervous, irresistible desire for laughter, which she concealed by bending over Chin-chin, the grave. She was honestly glad when the carriages once more moved onward, and she could give the coachman the order for home.

As for the rude young man, he made it his afternoon's business to discover who she was. It was the simplest matter, as almost the third man he met told him all he wished to know: "Daughter of Grantham. He knew Grantham? Wife of Carden, that prince amongst mer-

chants. She was one of the richest women in town, and her husband was an old fogey. Did they get on? was he jealous, eh? Oh, no doubt, no doubt. That sort of arrangement rarely answered; and there was something rather special about *her*, eh?"

So far all was decidedly satisfactory. Mr. Grantham was an old friend of the rude young man's father, whose name was Disney, and an introduction there might easily be managed. Then would follow an introduction to the "old fogey"—then to his wife; or perhaps he might meet her at Mr. Grantham's; no doubt she often went to her father's house to escape being tyrannized over by her husband—already he had come to the conclusion that the lord and master of that lovely girl was not only decrepit but a shameless despot.

A week later saw his desire fulfilled. Calling one morning on Mr. Grantham, card in hand, he found himself very kindly received, but in a manner that bespoke haste and preoccupation. Being on his best behavior, he at once, but delicately, took notice of this. Yes, Mr. Grantham confessed he was much hurried, and anxious to get to the City at once; would Mr. Disney pardon him? He begged he would not leave the house, however, but would permit his daughter, Mrs. Carden (who was just now staying with him for a day or two during her husband's unavoidable absence), to act as his deputy. She was upstairs in the drawing-room, she would be very pleased to see him, she had often heard him speak of his father, Colonel Disney, etc.

He rang the bell, and Disney followed a servant up the

broad staircase, who presently threw open a door and announced him in a mumbling fashion. He then withdrew, leaving the startled visitor uncertain as to whether he should advance or retire. Certainly the scene presented to him was a distinctly novel one in his range of experiences, and Disney did not attempt to deny even to himself that he was somewhat taken aback.

Was *this* the sedate young lady he had seen in her carriage? Where was the severity that then had marked her? —the dignity? Gone to the winds, apparently! That young lady was now in full pursuit of a terrier (deceitful terrier! where now was that pretense at decorum?), that, barking loudly and with all his might, was plunging about the room, under and over the ottomans, behind the lounges, through the intricate legs of the bijou tables, and in fact everywhere, in a boldly ubiquitous fashion. The erstwhile solemn Chin-chin had evidently entered into the spirit of the thing, and, hotly pursued by his mistress, was having quite a good time of it.

The mistress was laughing as heartily as the dog was barking, and, beyond question, was enjoying herself as much as he. She stopped dead short, however, as Disney entered the room, and gazed at him blankly.

She looked lovely. Far lovelier, even, than on that auspicious day when first his eyes met hers. She was flushed, her breath came quickly through her parted lips; she was like a happy child, with her soft, ruffled locks and gleaming, starry eyes. Two brilliant spots of color adorned each cheek. As she stood staring at Disney she grew adorably confused, and murmured “Oh!” quite naturally

beneath her breath. Indeed, if she had put her slender forefinger in between her rosy lips it would not have surprised him, or seemed to him out of place.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for intruding at this unearthly hour," he said, advancing toward her. "I am afraid you did not hear my name, servants have such a strange language of their own—Disney. Your father, who sent me up to you, gave me a hope that it would not be altogether unknown to you."

It was, however. Susie, though she conscientiously racked her brain to find some memory of the word Disney, still remained so hopelessly ignorant of it that her face betrayed her. He was the young man who had stared at her the other day, that was all she knew.

"Never mind," said Disney, who saw she did not recollect his name, and that it did not occur to her to tell a lie about it. "My father was a friend of yours long ago, so I wish you would let me hope that *we* may be friends in the future."

This was making hay with a vengeance; but he said it with such a beaming countenance that he carried all before him, and she put her hand in his. She looked at him, however, rather gravely.

"It was you," she said, "who—who *stared* at me in the park—last week."

An uncomfortable fear that he was going to laugh here made Disney miserable. He conquered, however, the vile inclination, and, with a most becoming contrition, said gently:

"I had been so *hoping* you had not noticed that. It has

been such a deep regret to me ever since; but"—an artful pause—"it was so difficult to—" Then very gently: "You should be the last to blame me." He stooped forward and patted the head of Chin-chin. "This is the little dog you had with you, isn't it?" he asked, with charming audacity.

"Yes." This mention of her favorite reminded her of her escapade of a moment since, and she blushed warmly. "He is a terrible dog," she said; "so flighty!"

"Dear me," returned Disney, thoughtfully. "From the momentary glance I caught of him that day in the carriage I should have thought him the very soul of propriety."

"That's it," said Mrs. Carden eagerly. "He is deceptive in little ways like that, though such a good dog all through. Abroad he plays at dignity, at home—" She paused eloquently, and then went on: "You can't think what a trouble he is. He *makes* me play with him whether I like it or not. And—of course it is always *not*. I really never *want* to run after him, but he barks so if I don't do it, that—" She failed here in her veracious history, and, catching Disney's eye, they both burst out laughing.

Her laugh he found was musical and perfectly spontaneous. He thought her quite as charming as he had expected her to be. He was delighted with her in the light of a discovery. He was not a society villain; he was by no means the elegant insidious creature with tawny mustache and cynical speech, of whom we sometimes read. He had had no evil design sealed and signed in his mind

when desiring to make her acquaintance. There was nothing in it, indeed, beyond the fact that he was a pleasure-loving young man, that he thought her out of the common, pretty, and that all pretty faces were a joy to him.

He had been in love scores of times, and always honestly believed the last recipient of his affections to be the one woman in the world for him. But now as he gazed at Susie, who was smiling at him and chattering to him in the most confiding manner, he told himself that his time was at last come. During all the yesterdays he might have *imagined* he had loved, but to-day he *knew*. All his former philandering was as naught; here, within this hour, he had found his fate.

Susie, once she had got over the first shock of his entrance, grew very gay, and amused him so well that he was horror-stricken on finding after awhile that he had been boring her for a whole hour. He started to his feet, but she would not hear of his going before luncheon.

"I shall be all alone," she said, beginning to look quite plaintive. "Mr. Carden is out of town, and papa never comes home till seven; it will be dull, of course, but if you would *only* stay—it will be such a comfort. Oh! you *will*? Oh! that is very good of you."

He *was* so very good! He kindly consented to stay, whilst feeling that it would not be in earthly power to drag him from the spot so long as she desired his presence. Presently the gong sounded, and, gathering up Chin-chin under her arm, she led the way to the dining-room.



For three months, as has been said, even up to the event of Mr. Disney's appearance on the scene, everything went well in the Carden *ménage*. And then, all in a second, as it were, a cloud gathered and fell. There was no leading up to it. It fell suddenly. Carden's face grew graver, sterner than ever, and those who knew him best noticed that a curious *fear* was mingled with the gravity.

What had happened? Was the young wife in fault? The old Tabbies shook their heads and hinted darkly at jealousy, and the cousin who had bought the cradle for the white mice whispered the word “Othello!” in a dim corner. A color was given to this solution of the mystery by the fact that Carden could not bear to let his wife out of his sight in these latter days, going with her wherever she went, and following her unceasingly with his eyes in whatever company they might be.

The girl seemed to grow restless beneath this *surveillance*, and her expression became noticeably nervous. By and by the air was stirred with the news that the Cardens would go nowhere. They had withdrawn almost entirely from society, and people began to whisper amongst themselves that he had forbidden her to accept any invitations. Truly this was Othello with a vengeance! They began to speculate as to whether he would have recourse to the pillows or the divorce court, and all felt that the latter would be tame.

Mr. Grantham grew uneasy and said a word or two to Susie about it, but little came of his inquiry. Geoffrey did not care to go out of late, she said; she did not know why, but so it was, and she did not care to go out without

him. She said all this very simply, just as one might who was telling the truth; but her father did not believe her. She was hiding something, he felt sure. Her pale little face smote him to the heart, and he began to have terrible moments in which he blamed himself for helping on the marriage. "May and December" kept ringing in his ears. How if she had found out her mistake too late, and was repenting her of having married a man all but twice her age?

She looked dull and dispirited, and the soft, merry, irresistible laugh that used to echo through the house was now silent. He would have spoken to Carden, but there was something in Carden's face at this time that forbade him.

He would have liked to discuss the matter with Disney, who had become quite a friend of his, but he felt that would not do either. The young man had taken to dropping in on all occasions, and the older man found that there was much pleasure to be derived from his society. He was also, he knew, a friend of Susie's, meeting her, as he did, so frequently at his house; though, strange to say, Disney and Carden were as yet strangers. Yet, however kindly disposed the young fellow might feel toward Susie, Mr. Grantham felt he was not at liberty to discuss with him or any one her most private affairs. He was sitting in his study brooding miserably over all this, when Disney himself walked in.

"Oh! you," said Mr. Grantham, rising to welcome him. "You've been out of town, haven't you? I remember that, because I missed you so much."

"That's very good of you," said Disney, who had really

grown quite attached to "the old gentleman," as he called him: if not the rose, you see, he was very near it. "Yes, I've been down in Hampshire with the governor, but a little of it goes a long way, so here I am again."

"I'm glad of it," said Mr. Grantham, nervously. "The fact is, I've got business to see to that will keep me from home until evening, and my daughter Mrs. Carden is staying with me just now, and if you think you could stay to luncheon and try to chee—to—er—that is, help her to get through the day, I'd be much obliged to you."

"I'll be delighted," said Disney, delicately ignoring the other's confusion. "Not that I see where I shall come in as useful. I'm rather afraid I shall be in her way. Where is she now?"

"Upstairs arranging the flowers, I think."

"Ah! I dare say I can wait upon her at that work," said Disney, laughing. He rose.

"And if you could come to dinner?" said Mr. Grantham, still nervously. This young fellow with his endless small talk and genial smile might throw a little brightness into her day. He had often noticed how well he and she got on together.

"Thank you," said Disney. "Same hour, I suppose?"

"Half-past seven, yes," said Mr. Grantham, almost gratefully.

Disney went up to the morning-room, where he knew he should find her. A whole week had gone by since last he saw her, a week that had seemed to him the longest he had ever spent. He opened the door with ill-suppressed eagerness and entered the room.

She stood at a table near the window, bending over a heap of blossoms that lay scattered before her. Her face was slightly turned from him, but he could see her. Good heavens! how changed! The listless air, the tired eyes, the languid movement of the slender fingers that used to be so quick, so prettily active. Her mouth had taken a little mournful curve.

He hesitated at the door, looking at her, hardly able to believe it was the same light-hearted little girl of a month ago, who had been running after her dog in and out amongst the intricacies of the furniture. After a moment she saw him, and blushed faintly as he came toward her. She smiled, but he could not fail to see that the smile, though kindly meant, was rather strained. He took her hand and held it closely.

"What has happened to you?" he said, abruptly.

"What a strange question! What should happen?" She spoke lightly, but a distressed look came into her lovely eyes.

"Ah! That is just what I want to know. I have not seen you for a week, and now to find you so changed, so pale—"

He paused, and the distressed look grew into a sort of terror, and she moved her hand restlessly in his as if to draw it away. This reminded him that he still held it, and he at once let it go.

"I beg your pardon," he said, hastily. "I had forgotten. There was another thing I was thinking of. You won't be angry with me, will you?" She shook her head. "Then, if you are in any trouble, and if I can help you—"

He stopped, a little afraid of what he had said, but he could see she was not angry at all, and that she was regarding him very kindly.

"No. You could not help me," she said, gently. This seemed to him a tacit acknowledgment that there *was* trouble somewhere.

"There *is* something, then?" he said. "If you would only tell me—"

She shook her head again.

"I couldn't," she said. "I—don't know it myself."

She turned away and went back to her flowers. She looked nervous, unstrung, and there was a curious perplexity about her. Disney felt indignation growing strong within him. Of course, it was that brute of a husband! He had been playing the tyrant more successfully than usual, no doubt, and the poor little thing, like all good women, would rather die than betray him. He felt his heart quite flowing over with pity for her—and we all know what that is akin to.

It came upon him very forcibly at this moment that he certainly did love her. A true lover should fly to his "Ladye's" rescue. But how to deliver her from this yoke she bore?—she looked so small, so fragile. Younger than ever, it seemed to him, although she had lost the girlish gayety that had been such a sweet part of her, and the happy laugh that had rung in his ears ever since he first heard it. Poor little Fatima! Bluebeard had murdered all that!

Well! he would try to cheer her up a bit, as the old gentleman had asked him to do. So he too went over to the

flowers, and began sorting them and putting them together, with the air of a connoisseur but a melancholy attempt at effect. Thus falling foul of her flowers, he perched himself on the edge of the table and began forming them into a bouquet that had no regard for the comfort of the eyes.

" You didn't know, perhaps," said he, " that I was a genius at this sort of thing? Many and many's the time I have been offered a handsome income by florists who shall be nameless, if I would only give up my present arduous occupation, and lend them my experience in the art of flower-grouping. An artistic eye for color is everything. See this now"—holding up a terrible combination of tints. " Fine catching effect, eh! No, not a word! I would have you study this posy. And if you would like a lesson or two, free of charge—why, as you are a friend of mine, I—"

He held up to her the posy in question; as ugly a thing as sweet flowers could ever be brought to look, and she laughed aloud, quite heartily, and shrugged up her shoulders, and, forgetting everything for the moment, put on one of her old delicious saucy little *moues* that used to delight him.

It was just at this instant that the door opened, and Carden came in.

He saw her as she stood there, with Disney sitting on the table near her! A young pair, smiling in the midst of flowers! He saw again the merry child he had married, he saw she was laughing as she had not laughed with him for many a day, and he saw too, alas! how the laugh died on her parted lips, as her eyes met his.

She paled perceptibly. Disney saw it all too—this sorrowful tableau—and his wrath waxed warm within him. Why, the fellow was no better than a detective! Pouncing in upon her like this, just to see what she was at. Deuced low, *he* called it—out of all form. He knew Carden very well by sight, as Carden knew him, and he could not fail to see that the man was pale, haggard, terribly worn in appearance. (“Temper!” concluded Mr. Disney, shortly.)

“I did not know you were coming here this morning,” said Mrs. Carden. She spoke timidly, as it seemed to Disney, and beyond one impetuous step in her husband’s direction, which she immediately checked, she made no effort to greet him, though he knew they had not seen each other since the previous day.

“No. It was a mere chance, my coming in now. I had a message for your father, and then they told me you were here—and—Your father is out, but it is of little consequence.” His tone was weary; and he ceased speaking suddenly, as though the power to go on was beyond him. (“Suppressing himself,” according to Mr. Disney.)

“If you will leave the message with me—or if you would come to dinner to-night—Papa has asked me to stay until Friday,” said Mrs. Carden, rather disconnectedly.

“Has he? I am glad of that,” returned her husband, slowly.

Mrs. Carden shrunk a little, as if hurt, and turned her face away.

(“Afraid he’ll see how relieved she is that there is no opposition to this arrangement,” decided Disney, who really might have taken precedence as a thought-reader.)

"Ah, then I shall have the pleasure of seeing you at dinner, Mrs. Carden," he said, gayly. "When your father just now asked me to come this evening, I had no idea such luck was in store for me." This wasn't strictly true, but Mr. Disney's air was truth itself.

Carden had moved as if to leave the room; he now stopped and looked at his wife.

"You have not introduced me to your friend," he said.

Mrs. Carden went through the introduction, and the two men, who had for so long known each other by sight only, were now made acquainted. Carden bowed formally. Into Disney's bow that young man managed to infuse a good deal of righteous unfriendliness, and he thought the earnest, penetrating glance bestowed on him by Carden bordered on impertinence.

"You will come to dinner, Geoffrey?" asked Mrs. Carden again. ("Burning to know her fate," thought Disney.) Carden did not answer for a moment, and then—

"No. I think not. No," he said, in a low tone. He hesitated as if he would have said something more, but changed his mind and went toward the door. When there he looked back.

"You should shut that window behind your back," he said; "you know you have a slight cold." His voice sounded dull and tired. He went out and shut the door gently behind him. He got half-way down the staircase, and then paused on one of the broad steps and stood silent, his hand on the baluster. All at once a vision had arisen before him—two young people laughing together, their

hands laden with flowers. Flowers, youth, laughter! Truly all those should go together. What had middle age to do with them? He felt unnerved, as though he had sustained a sudden shock—and frightened. It was an absurd feeling for a strong man like him, but he could not shake it off. Of late, what cruel, relentless Fate was pursuing him! and now this—well! it was only just. He bowed his head and lifted his hand to his face, which had grown ghastly.

Then the weakness passed, and with a heavy sigh he lifted his head. No, he would not believe this last misery; no—not yet.

* * * * *

Disney having now entirely convinced himself of his unchangeable affection for Mrs. Carden, she naturally occupied a good deal of his thoughts. That she was wretched with Carden was beyond a doubt, but how to rescue her from the Tyrant (he always pronounced it with a big T), *that* was the question. It seemed a forlorn hope. So long as the laws that now existed in this land held good, he saw no chance of being able to loosen the bonds that hurt her. Carden did not look like a man who would be “found out;” no “naughty, naughty story” would attach itself to him. Of that Disney felt assured. Yes, cruel as the man undoubtedly was to that pretty lovable creature, there was nothing dishonorable in his antecedents.

And yet the very next night put him in possession of a fact that, stolid young Briton as he was, drove the color from his cheek. Nothing could be done at the moment, but early the following morning, having spent a sleepless

night, he tore down in a hansom to the old house in Harley Street and burst into Mr. Grantham's study with a white face and a very nervous manner.

"It is an early hour, Mr. Grantham," he began, with much agitation; "but—but when you hear what I have to tell, you will, I know, excuse my thus rushing in upon you." He paused through some excitement, and Mr. Grantham turned to him a pale, startled face. The younger man leaned toward him across the table.

"Have you noticed," he asked, in a low, constrained tone, "that of late your daughter has not appeared to be —er—specially happy?"

At this Mr. Grantham rose to his feet. "Whatever you have to say," he said, "say it at once. It is—of *her*?"

There was terrible anguish in his voice.

"Of *her*? No; but of— Mr. Grantham, you will *hate* me, perhaps, for being the bearer of this evil news; but surely, if your daughter is unhappy in her marriage, it is better that she should be released from it."

"Go on," said Grantham, feebly. "If not of *her*, you spoke of Carden. What of him?"

"Just this. That his marriage with your daughter is illegal." He stood up and held out a hand that trembled.
"His first wife is—*still living!*"

Mr. Grantham sunk back in his chair.

"It isn't true—it isn't possible!" he said, presently. "To tell me Carden is a villain, is to tell me the whole world is false. I'll not believe it. Is he the man to come here and marry my girl, knowing all the while that—"

"Ah! but he did *not* know it. He thought that first

woman dead this many a year. But it appears she lied to him, sent him a false report of her death, and only a month ago turned up—well—sufficiently alive to make his second marriage a thing of naught.”

He made a little sweeping movement with his hand. He felt unfeigned grief for the pain he was causing this old man, who sat bowed and crushed in his chair, but he could not forget that here was a way of escape for Susie.

“A month ago!” said Mr. Grantham. “A whole month! All that time he knew my poor child was not his wife, and yet— Oh! I would not have believed it of him!”

“ Well, you know, ‘tis deuced hard to know how any of us would act under such circumstances,” said Disney, who felt he might now allow himself to be magnanimous toward the fallen foe. “I don’t altogether blame him myself. It would take a very plucky fellow to speak such a truth right out. But what I am afraid is that he might have let it go on forever; and—and at all events I thought it better that you should know.”

“ There is no question about that,” said Mr. Grantham, mournfully.

He covered his face with his hands. “ My poor Susie! my poor little girl!” he murmured, brokenly. Disney was horrified to find that he was crying, and that the heavy tears were running through his fingers. “ It can’t be true,” he cried again, after awhile. “ Tell me all you know of this diabolical story, and perhaps I may find a flaw in it.”

But there was no flaw in the story that Disney with

honest regret unfolded to him. When it was finished, Mr. Grantham had grown quite calm, though indignation seemed to burn hotly within him.

"Susie must be told, and at once," he said. "Fortunately, her attachment to him was not deep, and, as you say, of late has died altogether. It was the most black-guardly thing I ever heard, his concealing this matter. I could forgive anything but that. Yes, she owes him nothing." He rambled on thus, rather incoherently, but Disney kept him to the point.

"Who is to tell Mrs. Carden?" he asked. "Is she still with you?"

"Yes, but to-day she was to go home. Home! *This* is her home henceforth, poor child. You may remember she promised to stay with me till Friday. Good heavens, what an unlucky day! And as to telling her—"

"You must do it," said Disney, firmly.

Mr. Grantham shrunk away from him involuntarily.

"Alas! poor motherless girl!" he said, in a melancholy tone.

At this moment Susie entered the room; she came in quickly, but stopped with some abruptness as she caught sight of both their anxious faces.

"Something has happened! What is it, papa?" she cried, running to him.

Mr. Grantham, with an agonized glance at Disney, began an elaborate explanation which hopelessly confused her, and there stopped short, unable to proceed; whereupon Disney took up the parable, and told her bluntly in so many words the cruel truth. It was the kindest thing

he could have done, and he was strengthened by the thought that after awhile the knowledge, distressing as it was, would be a relief to her. It would mean freedom, if nothing else. He spoke quite lucidly—quite to the point. He explained to her fully that from this hour the tie that bound her to Geoffrey Carden was irrevocably broken, and when he had said all this he looked at her rather nervously to see how she had taken it.

Better than he had expected. She had been singularly silent all through, not a word had escaped her; and now she stood leaning against the table, with her eyes downcast, and her face pale as a lily: she did not tremble, she did not faint, she did not even move. Her very lips were bloodless, but she showed no sign of violent emotion; even as she thus stood, like one turned into stone, the sound of a quick firm footstep in the hall outside smote on her ears. Then for the first time she raised her head.

“That is Geoffrey!” she said, in a strange subdued way.

It was he. He flung open the door and advanced upon them with his head well thrown up, and a light in his eyes that had not been there for many a day. Not until he was well into the room, and his glance had fallen on the marble face of his wife, did that look of new fresh courage forsake him. He came to a standstill then, and looked inquiringly around.

“No further, Carden. Not a step further,” cried Mr. Grantham in a loud voice that yet trembled. “We know everything! I ask you as an honorable man what business you have here? Your wife does not dwell in *this* house.

Leave it, therefore, and permit my poor child to forget, if she can, the existence of one who has brought only shame to her."

Carden's face had changed. All the light died out of it, and he leaned heavily against a book-case near.

"You have heard—you have told *her*," he said, hoarsely.

"I did—what you ought to have done a month ago," replied her father, sternly.

"Oh, how had you the heart to do it!" cried Carden, bitterly. His miserable eyes were fixed on Susie, who stood motionless, as one asleep, with blanched lips, and a dazed, rigid expression on her childish face.

"It was necessary she should know," said Mr. Grantham, with a troubled air. "Was such a thing to be continued forever? And now your presence here only distresses her. Go! Leave us. Return to the woman who bears your name."

"She is dead," said Carden, simply. His whole soul was in his eyes, and they were riveted upon his wife. She knew! They had told her!

As he said this, a tremor ran through her. She stirred, and lifted her head, and made an effort as if to speak, but it was evidently beyond her. She looked round her in a young, bewildered way, and caught Disney's glance. He was so shocked by the look of troubled horror in her lovely eyes that he caught her hand, and held it close in both his own.

"Don't look like that," he entreated her. "Whatever has happened, you are *free!*"

The words reached Carden, and he started as if shot. He stood erect and began to tremble violently. Then all at once the hopelessness of it flashed upon him. It was quite true. She *was* free. He had no longer any right to interfere, even when she stood there before him—hand in hand—with— His breath came heavily through his parched lips.

“Dead!” said Mr. Grantham.

“Yes,” Carden forced himself to answer. “I saw her dead—yesterday. I made sure there should be no mistake this time. And yet—after all”—with exceeding bitterness—“what does it matter whether she be alive or dead? A month ago I heard that she was living. It fell upon me like a bolt from hell! It crushed from me all life and hope. I knew that it meant separation from the only thing on earth I loved, and I could not face that. I could not tell *her*.” He made a faint movement toward Mrs. Carden. “In that I wronged her. I confess that—all. I was cold to her for those miserable four weeks, unkind, I think—there were moments when I believed she misjudged me—but how could she know the tortures I was enduring? Tortures! Great Heaven!” cried he, with a sudden burst of passion, “what *were* they to what I am enduring now? If I have sinned, surely my punishment is great!” He pointed to where Susie still stood, pale and passive, with her cold hand clasped in Disney’s. “You were right,” he said. “She is no longer my wife. All is over!”

His head sunk upon his breast. Yes, all was indeed over. There was nothing left. She had never loved him, he now knew. That was bad; but to know that she loved

another—! Yet there was nothing to be said against it. The wildest protest would be of no avail. That man over there, holding her hand as though she already belonged to him, had told her she was free. And that was the actual truth. She would never be anything more to him, Geoffrey Carden, forever—whilst to that other she would be all in all!

Oh, the bitterness of it! Just as he thought Fate had at last relented and lifted that terrible shadow from his life, he found himself plunged in deeper shades; in a gloom, than which Death could not be darker. He looked old and worn out, as he stood there gazing his last upon the pretty little thing into whose hands he had given himself, to do with as she would. How strangely silent she was, with her eyes bent upon the carpet. Did she feel? Did she know? He could have groaned aloud as he watched her. He looked sadly old and crushed, as a man might whose last hope was dead. His heart indeed was broken!

Well! he would go home and put an end to it all. Life was but a poor thing as *he* had found it. He thought, not wildly, or desperately, but with a curious sense of comfort, of a revolver that lay in the right-hand drawer of his writing-table. He would put a finish to it so; to the fret and disappointment, and weariness of living!

“I suppose that is all,” he said, gently. “There is nothing more that need be said just now. You—they—will find me at home: I shall make arrangements—” He broke off rather incoherently, and moved toward the door. As he reached it a sharp cry rang through the room. It

came from Mrs. Carden. She had flung Disney's hand aside, and now ran to Carden, with a white, startled expression on her face as of one roughly awoken.

"What are you going to do, Geoffrey?" she cried, in a little panting whisper. "Where are you going? *Home*, you said, and without *me*? I am not going to stay here by myself."

Carden turned a livid face to hers.

"You don't understand," he said. "You are no longer bound to me. You are free—*free*. What that—that gentleman said just now was quite true; I have no longer any claim to you."

He felt as though the words scorched him as they passed his lips, yet he said them. As for Susie, two brilliant spots of color flamed into her cheeks and her eyes grew feverishly bright.

"Why do you speak to me like that?" she said. "It is not like you to be cruel to me. Oh! what horrible things they have said to me to-day." She put her hands in a bewildered fashion to her head. "Geoffrey, don't go without me," she entreated eagerly, in a low tone. "If you will wait for just one moment, until I get my hat—"

"Try to understand," said he, "you can not come home. We are no longer married. You are at liberty now to marry—any one you choose. You are, I tell you, *free!*"

"I am not. I *won't* be free. It isn't true," cried she, with sudden passion; "I have married you. I shall never marry any one else; and I *insist* on going home with you. Geoffrey! *Speak to me!*"

She held out her hands to him. He made a step toward her and caught and crushed them in his own.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he asked, in a choked tone. "If you marry me *now*, again, it will be forever."

"Oh! I *hope* so. Did you think I could live without you?" She hesitated, and gazed at him earnestly. A strange new light came into her eyes. Suddenly she burst into tears and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, how I love you!" she sobbed.

In that moment she ceased to be a child; she became a woman. Her heart had spoken to her.

As for Carden, who shall describe the change in him; or the glory of hope resuscitated, that illumined his face? That touch of age disappeared; he looked now like a new man. He could not speak, he could only press convulsively to his heart the little idolized form, now, indeed, entirely his own. He saw nothing but the pretty fair head upon his breast—he felt only the tender clinging arms. An outside world *might* exist, he knew nothing of it, *his* world was folded close to him. She was his. His own. She loved him and no other. Oh! the wonder of that thought. She surrendered all for him. Why, this was better than anything of which he had ever dreamed.

No word escaped him, yet thoughts rushed tumultuously from his heart. They blended themselves into a rapturous cry of thankfulness to the Almighty.

At the other end of the room the two remaining actors in the drama were smitten dumb. Disney, who had artistic tendencies and an eye for a good effect, could not help

feeling impressed by the scene before him, though considerably confounded by the turn events had taken. That she should love the husband after all! It was a revelation to him. Good heavens! who would have suspected it? Woman, as a contradiction, became known to him. There was, however, a certain pathetic beauty in the unexpected denouement that touched him. That old simile about the ivy and the oak never seemed better exemplified. And of course it was better as it was; and if she was not fair to him, why— He was a philosophic young man, and he shrugged his shoulders with not altogether a bad grace. But what an amount of sympathy he had flung to the winds! He picked up his hat and stole on tiptoe from the room.

If he had stamped out of it, however, it would have been all the same, as Carden would not have heard him. He was now stroking the pretty head, and whispering to it words of love. He felt as though he were wooing his sweetheart for the second time; but how different it was to-day! Now it was a woman, loving and beloved, he held within his arms. He could feel the throbbing of her heart against his own. All would indeed be different now. That awful shadow was lifted from him, and he would give her such a life as—

He became aware suddenly that Mr. Grantham was speaking to him. The old gentleman's voice was husky, but unfeignedly glad.

“Who'd have thought it?” he was saying. “I was all astray, I must confess. But it is the best thing that could have happened. It settles everything. There need

be no *exposé*, no town talk, no scandal. Not a soul need know it beyond ourselves. Disney I can depend upon, and Maitland—you remember Maitland? I was thinking, if I got an old friend like that, he would read the words over you two again in a hurry and everything could then go on just as it was before.”

He was delighted with his own idea, and ran out of the room to see to it forthwith.

“Geoffrey,” said Mrs. Carden, lifting her head and raising a very pale little face to his, “was it because of that—that woman, that you have been so changed all this past dreadful month?”

“Yes, darling. Was it not enough to—”

“Only that. And all that time I thought you were angry with *me* about something. That you were disappointed in me. That you regretted your marriage.”

“Regretted it!”

“Oh! if you had only told me.”

“How could I tell you? Even now the very memory of it makes me grow cold with horror. And to tell *you*! To risk the chance of losing you—”

“You wouldn’t have lost me,” she said, shaking her charming head sturdily. “I should have gone home, I suppose,” doubtfully. “But I should have waited and waited, and after all, as you see, I should have come back to you.”

“Ah! but how was I to be sure of that? You didn’t love me then, as—”

“Yes, I did. I’m *sure* of it. Only I didn’t know it,

that's all. Do you know, Geoff"—she drew down his face to hers and kissed him once again—"I'm rather glad that this has happened. I never, *never* before felt so happy as I feel just now." She said it very simply, but her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh! Susie, I wish I weren't such an old fogey, and—"

"Well, there's one thing!" interrupted she sternly; "and as we are about to begin all over again, I may as well mention it. I won't have you call yourself horrid names before *me*! Anything else you like, but that—*No!*"

“NONE SO BLIND—”

CHAPTER I.

MISS FRENCH, having won her set in a very glorious fashion, threw her racket with a little graceful enthusiasm into the air, caught it again as gracefully as it descended, and, with a congratulatory word or two to her partner, moved with him across the shaven lawn in the direction of a shady seat that was hidden somewhere amongst the shrubberies.

“I suppose there is something in that?” said Mrs. Travers, a pretty woman of about five-and-thirty, looking after her, and flicking her fan delicately in the direction of the girl’s companion.

“Impossible to say,” returned Lady Synge, coldly. “I should be the last one in the world to give an opinion about her acceptance or refusal of anybody, as I confess I don’t understand her in the least.”

“Considering that you are her cousin in some sort, and that you are not devoid of penetration, and that she lives so much with you, that is a remarkable speech.”

“True, however. As to her staying with me, she does that just as she chooses. She is too big an heiress to be under any one’s control, and her beauty besides makes one a little afraid of her.”

“Or for her?”

“Oh, certainly not. I will do her the justice to say that I believe her quite equal to the care of herself. She will not mix herself up in any imbroglio, nor will she marry beneath her. She has her own interests too much at heart for that!”

She spoke bitterly, and the other woman cast a side glance at her.

“It was an unfortunate thing that that melancholy accident put an end to Victor’s chance,” she said.

“*Had* he a chance?” Lady Synge’s face, handsome still if middle-aged, clouded perceptibly as Mrs. Travers mentioned her nephew’s name. “A poor baronet with only £3000 a year! Oh, I think not; I give her credit for greater prudence. That she trifled with him two seasons ago in the cruellest manner, I admit; but that he ever had a chance of gaining her I do not believe. She is a practiced coquette, and of course he was fair game. The more desirable in that he had gained a character for coldness before she met him.”

“He was frantically in love with her, at all events.”

“Yes; I have no doubt she found him amusing. I always tell myself how thoroughly she must have enjoyed that victory.”

“I think perhaps you wrong her a little,” said her friend gravely. “There is something in her face—her eyes, is it?—or her mouth?—that precludes the idea of cruelty.”

“It isn’t worth an argument,” said Lady Synge, impatiently. She would have liked to say “she” instead of

“it,” but breeding forbade. “My only regret is that he should have met her *before* this terrible thing befell him. Now, behind his darkened eyes, her face lives fresh in his memory. He can not forget her, and I can not forgive her, in that she has added another grief to his already too mournful lot.”

“Poor Victor!”

“No! Not poor! Such a word could not apply to him,” exclaimed Lady Synge, hastily. “Any one with a mind so sweet, a heart so pure as his, could never be called poor!”

Then in a breath she contradicted herself. She folded her hands tightly in her lap, as with the hope of suppressing her strong emotion; a heavy sigh fell from her, and she murmured to herself in a heart-broken tone, “My poor fellow! My poor, poor boy!”

“It was the most melancholy thing I ever heard of,” exclaimed Mrs. Travers, quickly, who was always nervous about witnessing emotion in others, being pretty well case-hardened herself. “With such a career before him, too! His commission flung up, and—”

“He felt *nothing* so keenly as his lost chance of winning that girl,” interrupted Lady Synge with some excitement. “His heart and soul were centered in her—nay, are. She is the cause of all his misery.”

“Not all, surely. You are a little hard on Joan. She had nothing to do with that miserable accident on the hunting-field.”

“Who shall say she hadn’t? Her rejection of him made him reckless in many ways. Oh, if she had only accepted

him! But, as I have said, he wasn't good enough for a girl so worldly wise as she is.”

“ You would accuse her now of being mercenary; and certainly she is not that. She refused to my knowledge many good offers since Victor proposed to her. *One* of them the best last year afforded.”

“ Not mercenary: I do not accuse her of that, but ambitious. She is looking for rank, no doubt. I heard that young man who was playing with her just now, Lord Dornsford, was very attentive to her last Christmas at the Bellais's, and that she was at least not uncivil to him. Is it true? You go more into the world than I do; you should know.”

“ Yes, I also heard it,” said Mrs. Travers, a touch of constraint in her tone.

“ Was that why you brought him here to-day?”

Mrs. Travers flushed, and bit her lips.

“ Well—perhaps,” she said. “ And if so, there was more kindness than cruelty toward Sir Victor in such an act. If Lord Durnsford comes to the point, Joan will certainly accept him, as few girls I take it would refuse one of the oldest earldoms in England with such a rent-roll attached to it as he can offer. That would put an end forever to any wild hopes Sir Victor still may entertain. Surely that will be a good thing for him.”

“ You overburden him with your kindness.”

“ You regard it too much from one side only,” said Mrs. Travers warmly. “ Some thought should be given to her. Considering the sad affliction that has befallen

your nephew, surely it would be better for her to marry well than to—”

“She could not do better than marry Victor, blind though he be,” persisted Lady Synge, so obstinately that Mrs. Travers, with a wisdom that was hardly to be expected of a woman, shrugged her shoulders and withdrew from the subject. It was impossible, she told herself, that she should agree with Lady Synge. If Joan, who was quite a dear friend of hers, had happened to love this poor afflicted young man, why, well and good. Love, which is charity, covers a multitude of defects; but that she did *not* love him seemed to Mrs. Travers a special interposition of Providence, and a very happy thing indeed.

She was still thinking of this when a rustle of soft garments just behind her made her turn her head. Joan Ffrench was standing at her side, but she was not looking at her—her eyes were fixed upon her cousin, Lady Synge.

She was a tall girl, with features that were strictly regular; all save the mouth, which was a trifle larger than it should be. Her eyes were soft and dark, and she was beyond doubt extremely beautiful; indeed, there were very few women who did not sink into insignificance beside her. She was thoroughly bred in her appearance, and there was something in her expression that gave one the idea that she would be perfectly able to judge for herself on even the knottiest point, without calling in the aid of her friends. But it was the faulty mouth that was her chief charm. When she smiled something grew upon it, that rendered her soft, sweet, and pliant as the veriest child.

She stooped over Lady Synge's chair and patted her on the shoulder.

“Giving me ‘the bastinado with your tongue,’ auntie?” she asked gayly. She always called her cousin, “Auntie.” “No, do not deny it. A lengthened experience has taught me that when your mouth takes that particular curve, you are saying naughty things of me.”

“Where is Victor?” asked Lady Synge, abruptly, taking no heed of the foregoing. Miss Ffrench raised her brows.

“Is it a foregone conclusion that I should know where he is?” she said. “Well,” with a change of tone that produced her perfect smile, “as it happens, I *do*. He is in the rose garden, talking to Colonel Ashton of politics, dry as that tanned old warrior himself.”

“Ah! he will be tired, bored, worn out,” cried Lady Synge, rising with her usual impetuosity to her feet. She looked at Joan with intense reproach in her eyes, and the girl smiled back at her as if amused.

“You could at least have prevented that,” said Lady Synge.

Miss Ffrench shrugged her shoulders. It was a trick of hers, and she did it very charmingly, but she said nothing. Lord Durnsford, who was with her, and who saw the shrug, smiled discreetly.

“By Jove! she evidently expects you to play the keeper to Sir Victor,” he said in a whisper, as though such expectation were one of the greatest jokes extant. “Bound to look after him, eh? and deliver him out of bondage on all occasions. A rather absurd notion, eh?”

His manner toward Miss Ffrench as a rule was absolutely servile, yet just now he found he was unhappy enough to have in some unknown way offended her.

“Why absurd?” she asked, in a tone that froze him, and killed the insipid smile upon his lips. She swept him with a glance, and then turned abruptly away from him, and to Lady Synge.

“I am off to the rescue,” she said gayly. “I shall bring back Sir Victor, I promise you, dead or alive. Wish me luck in my hazardous enterprise. Consider how many times the colonel has been under fire, and how seldom I.” Here Mrs. Travers laughed a little satirically.

“How, then?” demanded Miss Ffrench, turning to her.

“Why, there are fires and fires,” said she, with a comical glance. “But,” making an imperceptible gesture toward Lady Synge, who was looking anxious as she dwelt on her “poor fellow” being thus given up to the cruel mercies of a doting old Indian officer, “if you indeed mean a rescue, why go. But when you *have* carried off your prey—what then?” There was considerable meaning in her voice. Miss Ffrench reflected for a moment.

“That’s the worry of it,” she said. “One seldom knows what to do with one’s captive. Well—as you put it to me—read to him as usual, I suppose, now that our neighbors have kindly made up their minds, *at last*, to go home. What a trial these afternoons are in the country!—What! going so soon, dear Lady Primrose? Why, it is quite early yet. Ah, well—good-bye! Yes, he likes being read to, doesn’t he, auntie?”

“He likes you to read to him,” replied Lady Synge, in an uncompromising tone.

“Consider it done, then,” said her lovely cousin, with a sprightly air. She moved away from the group minus an attendant, the discomfited earl being too depressed after his late snubbing to dare offer himself as an escort.

Mrs. Travers as she passed her stopped her for a moment.

“*Why* do you read to him?” she asked, with a suspicion of censure in her manner.

“Ah! That is just what I so much wish I knew myself,” responded she, with a careless laugh.

Here two figures emerging from the laurestine on their left caught and held all their attention. One was a tall young man of about twenty-nine. He walked somewhat deliberately, and leaned as he went on his companion’s arm. He was singularly handsome, if rather emaciated in appearance, and his eyes, wide open, were large and dark. They seldom moved, however, and one might remark that their lids did not cover and uncover them with the nervous frequency of those who see. Otherwise one could hardly imagine him sightless; yet, alas! dark as were those beautiful eyes, their vision was darker still.

He was putting in a word here and there in his companion’s voluble flow of political platitudes, but he was evidently without interest in the subject under discussion. His attention seemed indeed a trifle strained, as though he were listening intently for some sound or thing that lay well outside the colonel’s prosy talk, and that might come

to him at any moment. There was upon his face that sad look of expectancy that characterizes the newly blind.

Miss Ffrench went up to him and touched his arm. He started violently, and on the instant his whole expression changed. The melancholy forsook it, a smile radiant as her own lit his whole face. It touched whatever heart she had, or permitted herself to have, and with a view to overcoming her own emotion (which annoyed her) she put on her liveliest air.

“They have all gone, Victor,” she said. “*Such a pity, eh?* If they could have fully sounded the depth of our grief at their departure, I doubt not all these dear neighbors of ours would have gone a little sooner.”

“You are smiling,” said the blind man, softly. “I can know *that*, at least. After all, I have some small mercies left me. I know how you look when you smile.”

She frowned slightly, as if hurt; but this happily was unknown to him. In a moment she had recovered herself.

“Auntie is miserable about you,” she said lightly. The old colonel had beaten an early retreat. “And you know of old when she is miserable about *you*, she consoles herself by abusing *me*. Come, then, let me read to you, and save me from her wrath.”

“Ah! *Will you?*” He spoke eagerly, but almost immediately checked himself. “You are very good,” he said—“too good to a poor fellow like me, but I must not accept your offer. With so many guests in the house—to give so much time to me—it is out of the question.” Then suddenly he put out his hand and touched her. He could not see; but as it happened it was her arm, just be-

low the elbow, that he caught. She had drawn off her long gloves to play that last set, and the pretty soft rounded arm was bare. His fingers crept round it tenderly, and a swift flush rose to his cheek. “No! do not take me at my word,” he said, hurriedly. “I *can not* resign this pleasure you would give me.”

Miss Ffrench patted the hand resting on her arm, in the airiest fashion, and then as airily displaced it from its desirable position.

“Pouf,” she said, “to be too punctilious is to lose the salt of life. I feel I have done my duty by auntie’s guests for *one* day. Come, give me my reward. I am tired, and to sit in a shady room and read aloud a favorite poem or two will rest me. To read to you especially, as you are ever an appreciative audience.”

This, coming from another woman, might savor of encouragement; but Miss Ffrench was clever, and contrived to insert into her tone a touch of absolute indifference that utterly destroyed the sweetness of the words. He sighed involuntarily, and followed her in-doors to a cozy little room, half library, half boudoir, where he sunk with a rather exhausted air upon a lounge.

She looked at him sharply.

“You don’t grow stronger,” she said.

“Oh! I hope not,” he returned wearily.

“What an absurd answer!” She spoke angrily, and threw the book she held upon the table near her, with rather unnecessary violence. “Your affliction is of course great, but you are not the only one; others have endured it. Surely your strength is as good as theirs.”

“As good—so far. But to be blind is not the worst thing that can befall a man.”

It was impossible that she should misunderstand him.

“From you,” she said, growing extremely pale, “such a speech as that is crueler than it could ever be from another. Considering all that has come and gone between us, you might have spared me that.”

“Considering all—you speak of—you might have judged me more justly. *Could* I think one unkind thought of you? And do you believe I have not measured the gulf that now divides us? In my best days I was nothing to you, and now—”

“Yes, yes. I was hasty. I wronged you,” said she hurriedly.

“You are an angel to bear with the whims and fancies of a poor wretch like me.” Then he held out his hand to where he might reasonably suppose she was sitting.

“Give me your hand,” he said. “That sweet pledge I once strove to win from you, to have and to hold forever, you will surely not refuse to *lend* me now, in this my evil-est hour.”

She pushed back her chair and rose abruptly.

“No, no,” she said. “Think me cruel, unfeeling if you will, but believe me it is for the best.”

“As you will,” he said, gently. “And now for this reading you have promised.”

Miss Ffrench, who was in spite of herself disturbed, regarded him intently for awhile, then turned abruptly aside, and, happy in the mournful knowledge that he could not see her, she pressed her hand convulsively against

her eyes. If by this means she pressed back any unwelcome tears, was known only to herself. When she spoke there was not the faintest trace of emotion in her clear fresh voice.

“Well, what shall it be?” she said. “What have we here?” She took up a book at random from the table. “Swinburne, eh? He is the least little bit too sentimental for me, I confess; but I’ll try something. The first thing I open at—”

She gave a careless glance at the page before her, and began—

“‘Let us go hence, my songs: she will not hear.
Let us go hence together without fear;
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,
And over all old things and all things dear.
She loves not you nor me as all we love her.
Yet, though we sung as angels in her ear,
She would not hear.

“‘Let us go hence, go hence: she will not see.
Sing all once more together; surely she,
She too, remembering days and words that were,
Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,
We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been
there,
Nay, and though all men seeing had pity on me,
She would not see.’

“What folly it all is!” she cried, irritably, flinging the book aside. “Why not have something more wholesome than that, if you must have poetry? Pshaw! to think of

any man, *calling* himself a man, wasting so much breath over a creature devoid of feeling.”

He was silent.

“Why do you not speak?” she cried angrily. “Perhaps you think my censure falls upon myself. Am *I* such a creature? Have *I* no feeling?”

“You have more than most, I think. That is why I love you.” He spoke quite calmly, and as though it were a very ordinary thought with him. “And as for that other of whom you have been reading, who shall say that she felt for no one? To that one man perhaps she was dead; but to another—Joan”—his tone grew low and eager—“tell me one thing. Are you going to marry Durnsford? A whisper—a suspicion of it has been conveyed to me.”

“A very unstable whisper.”

“You deny it, then?” His breath came quickly; he leaned toward her, a very world of hope in his sightless face. It crushed her. She rose and drew back a step or two, laying her hand upon a chair near her as if to steady herself.

“There is no need for denial,” she said. “Lord Durnsford has not done me the honor to ask me—yet!”

She did great violence to her feelings when she spoke that “yet,” but she felt it her duty to do it. To deceive him, even in so legitimate a matter, was more than she could compass. Contrary to her expectations and her fears, however, he took it very calmly.

“I see—I quite understand,” he said. “I have probed you as I should not have done, and you have borne with

me as I believe no other woman could. And—do not feel sorrow for me, Joan. That I love you is my one undying joy. Now go on with our reading, and choose this time something a little less sad. Forget this folly of mine—forget all, save, though I am always helpless, I am still your cousin and your friend.”

CHAPTER II.

IN the reception-rooms outside, where the people were moving to and fro, or standing in little groups to criticise the music, the lights were brilliant; but in this small flower-filled room the lamps burned low, shedding a soft rich crimson flood of radiance on the low divans and gleaming statuettes. The breath of dying roses filled the apartment; the last exquisite tones of a celebrated singer had ceased upon the air. There was absolute silence, save for the impassioned accents of a man who, leaning against a marble pillar, was gazing down eagerly upon the girl beneath. It was Lord Durnsford.

Miss Ffrench lay back in a fauteuil. She was looking indescribably lovely, but with a face as white as her gown. The latter was of ivory satin, unrelieved by color of any sort, if one excepted the tiny sparks of many colors that flashed from the diamond band that encircled her neck, and from the diamond star that lay half hidden in her hair. Of any other ornaments she was guiltless. Her eyes were lowered, and she held upon her knee a large white fan, round which her fingers had closed with rather unwonted force.

Lord Durnsford was speaking in an eager, disconnected fashion.

"It is hardly necessary to say it—is it? You must have known—have seen—for so long. To say now that I love you, seems to say—so little. Joan!—you are listening. You do not forbid me to go on!"

He waited a moment, during which her lips grew whiter, and her fingers closed even more tightly on the luckless fan. It broke.

"Why should I forbid you?" she said at last, coldly, but very distinctly.

The light of triumph shot into his eyes.

"Do you know what that means? You accept me, then
—*at last!*"

He put out his hand to take hers, but with a little stifled exclamation she rose to her feet, and going quickly to the open window, flung back the silken curtain and let the moonlight stream into the room. As she stood there, leaning rather heavily against the frame-work, he could see that her face was white as death.

"What is it? You are faint?" he exclaimed, anxiously.

"No—no, indeed; it is nothing. But that room inside—it was suffocating."

She looked at him as she spoke, and compelled a shadow of a smile to her lips.

"You are sure you are well?"

"Quite well."

"Give me my answer, then," he entreated. "Joan, you will marry me?"

She hesitated—even then. It was, however, a very momentary hesitation; one little word and she would be a countess—the richest in England; and yet—and yet—the little word was said nevertheless.

“Yes,” she answered, in a low tone.

He put out his arm as if to draw her to him, but she shrunk away and turned her face to the deserted room within, as if seeking for escape. In her large brilliant eyes there was a curious hunted expression.

At this moment, as though in answer to her secret desire, two people strolled into the room, talking briskly.

“Ah!—Captain Greville!” cried Miss Ffrench, in her soft *trainante* voice. She went up to him with a certain *empressement* that made Greville’s heart (who had loved her from afar many a month) beat with unpleasant haste. “You, too, then, have discovered this coziest nook in all the world. See, Lord Durnsford and I have let the moonlight in upon it—one more charm added, we thought; eh?”

A little excitable laugh broke from her. She swept past him without waiting for an answer, to the open doorway that led into the reception-room beyond, Lord Durnsford accompanying her.

“I shall go home,” she said, gently. “Do you think you can take me to Mrs. Travers? I feel very tired.”

“You are too pale, indeed. To-morrow, then. May I call?”

“To-morrow? Yes. But until then”—she regarded him earnestly—“you will give me your word to mention nothing of what has passed between us to-night?”

“Certainly,” replied he, gravely.

She found Mrs. Travers presently and induced her to leave, although the night was still young. She was so pale, so silent on the way home, that Mrs. Travers, who was a born diplomatist, guessed how matters stood at once, and had it all out of her in less than seven minutes.

“You lucky girl!” she cried; “to land *the* event of the season. My congratulations come from my heart. Bless me!—won’t Bella feel anyhow when she hears of it! You will be the envy of hundreds, let me tell you—a fact sufficient in itself to make any well-regulated girl happy for life.”

“Well, I can’t say I feel specially happy,” said Joan, in a rather depressed tone.

“More shame for you then,” returned her sprightly friend, who indeed had small patience with such ingratitudo toward a kindly fate. “Now I do hope you are not going to be silly about want of love, etc. All that sort of nonsense is exploded long ago. And a good thing, too! When you have been married to him for six months you will adore him—*because* he loves you. I know all about it. I’ve seen dozens of girls married who hadn’t a spark of affection for their husbands, and they’d be awfully mad if you told them so now. And Durnsford is specially unobjectionable. Very desirable indeed in many little ways. I expect you will have a real good time with him; a better time than most. Oh! if I had only had your chance, how I should have jumped with joy!”

“Is that entirely true? Would you give up Harry to be Lady Durnsford?”

Mrs. Travers laughed.

“Oh!—*Harry!*” she said. “*Harry* is *such* a fool! And besides, you trench on delicate ground, my good child. Would you have me give him up *now*, after all these years of married bliss! Think what the world would say.”

“Oh! you know what I mean. No, you loved Harry. You may call him a fool, but you don’t mean it. And even so, as it seems to me, it would be better to marry a fool than any other man, provided you loved him.”

“You are younger than you look,” said Mrs. Travers, with fine contempt.

Here they arrived at the house in Park Lane, so that perforce the discussion came to an end, never, as it happened, to be renewed. On a salver in the hall they found some letters awaiting them that had come by the latest post, and taking them up, they went into the morning-room with them, which was well-lighted.

The handwriting being unknown to her, Miss Ffrench opened the first of hers lazily; she scanned its contents, and suddenly a low but terrible cry broke from her. Mrs. Travers, looking up hurriedly, was a good deal frightened by her expression. She stood at the table, white and shivering.

“He is dying!” she cried, sharply.

“Dying!—Who? Durnsford?” asked Mrs. Travers, aghast, whose mind just then ran upon one man only.

“Oh, no; no, no! Would to Heaven it were! But Victor—Victor!” She sunk into a chair, and letting her arms fall prone upon the table, buried her face on them.

“See!” she said, pushing the letter toward her friend without looking up.

Mrs. Travers took it. The writing was altogether unlike the clear caligraphy on the envelope. It was indeed wild and straggling—the writing of one not only blind, but past all strength. There was a tragical look about it that frightened her, and with that and the irregularities of the hand it took her quite a minute to read it through. It ran as follows:

“After all it was of no use. They tell me I have not many hours to live. But I could not go from you *forever*, my love, my darling, without one word. They tell me you are going to marry him. It is this, then: That I pray God to bless you every hour of your life. But—in all the happy years that lie before you, do not *quite* forget me.”
VICTOR.”

“What a *fiasco!*” was Mrs. Travers’s first thought. Her second—how to successfully manage the affair. She therefore read the note over again, with a view to giving herself time.

“Oh, it can’t be altogether so bad,” she said, hardly knowing what to say. “He is very incoherent, and probably thinks himself weaker than he is.” She glanced again at the letter—“‘After all it was of no use.’—What was of no use, I wonder? Poor fellow! He was a little off his head, no doubt, and imagined himself worse than usual.”

Her voice roused Joan. She stood up, and raising both

arms, pushed back the hair from her forehead. Her face was ghastly, and her eyes shone like stars. She looked terrible with her miserable face and her gay attire—the rich ivory satin and the gleaming diamonds.

“But one thing could make it worse,” she said. “No, there is no doubt. He is dying. Dying—and *alone!*!” She caught her breath quickly. “You know auntie is laid up in that house in Cheshire. There is no one with him. Oh! to be dying, without a friend near. It is horrible—horrible!”

She began to pace up and down the room in a wild, excitable way, but presently came to a standstill before Mrs. Travers.

“I shall go to him,” she said, abruptly.

“Joan!—impossible!”

“Why is it impossible? It shall not be so.”

“For one thing because, as you have just said, he is alone. Your going would compromise you. Think what the world would say. Think of Lord Durnsford.”

“I can think only of Victor. Nothing shall prevent my going to him—nothing, nothing!” She tore off her long white gloves and threw them on the table. “When does the next train go?” she asked, feverishly.

“If you take this step you will imperil your reputation,” cried Mrs. Travers, angrily. “One can’t do odd things of this kind without being talked about. And *you*—who are so proud—how will you like that?”

“If to go to a dying cousin is to imperil one’s reputation—”

“To go to a dying lover, rather. All the world knew of his infatuation.”

“If the fact of his having loved me will militate against me, so be it then. Oh, how he *did* love me!” she cried, with a burst of anguish.

“And your engagement to Lord Durnsford?”

“That is all over now. I shall never marry him—I shall never marry any one.” She had again been walking up and down, as though to be quiet was impossible to her, and now again she stopped. “Listen to me,” she said. “I may as well tell you all now. I—” clasping her hands and lifting her beautiful, haggard face—“for two long years I fought against it; I *would* not believe it! I *swept* to myself that it was not so—but now—now, I know. I lied to myself. That letter”—crumpling it up feverishly in her hot, slender fingers—“has taught me that I love him, as I never have, as I never can love another!”

“Joan!—I think,” said Mrs. Travers, coldly, “that, considering all that has happened this evening, it is a little too late to—”

The girl threw out her hands wildly.

“Oh, those terrible words! Oh, no! it *can not* be too late,” she cried, catching the sound, not the spirit, of her companion’s speech. “Oh, Claudia, if you ever loved me, help me now!” She glanced at the clock. “It is already two,” she said. “When does the next train go?”

“There is one at six, I believe,” replied Mrs. Travers, sulkily.

“Not before that—not until four long hours have gone? Think, dear Claudia, think! There must be a train, even

an hour, one hour earlier. Where is your book, your guide? Dear Heaven! how much can happen in four hours!”

“Do you know that you are extremely selfish?” cried Mrs. Travers, the more wrathfully in that she felt she was going to give in. “You look only on one side of the question. You do not consider Durnsford; and as for me—how am I to account to Lady Synge for this mad freak of yours?”

“You are right. I am selfish,” said the girl, wretchedly. She looked round her in a vague, hopeless way, and then suddenly burst into a passion of tears.

Of course when she saw her crying, Mrs. Travers forgave her. She went to her and put her arms round her.

“See, now,” she said; “to be able to write at all, proves that he can’t be so *very* bad. Come upstairs with me and let me help you to change your dress. I dare say we shall find plenty to do before we start.”

“We?”

“Of course I shall go with you,” said Mrs. Travers, virtuously. “Do you imagine I should let you undertake a questionable affair of this kind without a chaperon?”

CHAPTER III.

THEY got there about eight o’clock the same morning. As they mounted the steps of Sir Victor’s house Mrs. Travers cast a hurried look at Joan, and seeing that she was quite incapable of taking the initiative in any way, that

she was indeed on the point of fainting, went quickly forward as a servant opened the door. Her own heart began to beat wildly as she considered that this man might have the word “death” upon his lips.

“How is Sir Victor?” faltered Mrs. Travers at last.

“Well, m’—no worse, thank God,” said the man, earnestly. Joan burst into tears. The servant stepped aside as a tall, lean, elderly gentleman came down the hall, whom Mrs. Travers recognized as the celebrated physician Sir Sampson Baker. She went eagerly up to him, whilst Joan, overcome, sunk upon one of the hall chairs.

“Is there hope?” cried Mrs. Travers, clasping the doctor’s hand.

“Why, yes, my dear madame. Even I will venture to say a *strong* hope. He has got through the night admirably. Better even than I expected. You have come to stay, eh? Quite right: quite right. Some one to cheer him is what he will want from this out. His sister?”—casting a sharp glance at Joan.

“His cousins,” said Mrs. Travers, with quite a long stress on the plural. She took this new relationship upon her in the easiest manner possible. “You see, Lady Synge being ill in Cheshire and unable to move, she was naturally anxious that we should come down and supply her place as well as we could.”

“Yes, yes. It was a very unfortunate thing her being invalided just now, as Sir Victor’s eyes being in a fit state for the operation, we were quite afraid to let it go any further.”

“His eyes? Is there hope of recovery there? Was

there an operation?” exclaimed Mrs. Travers, in astonishment.

“ Dear me! I fancied you knew. Why, yes. And a very successful operation, I trust, now his strength is returning; but I warn you it is quite a touch and go matter, as yet. We must be cautious, you see—extremely cautious.”

“ To think we should not have heard!”

“ He kept it entirely secret, poor fellow, lest it should prove a failure. He was very nervous about it. Lady Synge alone knew, and I thought she might have told you. Not that I had the least idea until now that you were a cousin of his.”

“ Could we—I—see him?” asked Mrs. Travers, turning the subject adroitly.

“ Well—really—he has had such an excellent night. What do you say, nurse?” asked Sir Sampson, addressing a tall, pale young woman who now appeared in the background. He whispered a few words to her. She then inquired the names of the two ladies, and having withdrawn, presently returned again.

“ If you will come this way, madame,” she said, addressing Mrs. Travers, “ you can see him. I have prepared him in a measure, but he seemed a little unnerved. I mentioned your names, and I would earnestly enjoin quiet on you.”

“ You hear, Joan?” said Mrs. Travers. She pushed the girl forward. “ Go,” she said.

The nurse and doctor looked both a little surprised.

The former, noting the pallor that distinguished Miss Ffrench's face, said gently:

“The one thing we have principally to guard against is excitement. You will remember that?”

“I shall remember,” said Joan.

The nurse stopped and threw open a door with the softest touch possible. After that she stepped back into the corridor, and Joan entered the room alone. The light in it was very subdued, all the curtains being drawn, and for a moment she felt bewildered. Then she looked round her fearfully.

He was lying on his side, and there was a delicate white bandage across his eyes. When she saw him all fear died from her, and she crossed the room with a swift, light step, and took the hand that was lying on the counterpane and pressed it to her bosom.

“Victor,” she whispered, tremulously. She felt his hand vibrate within her own.

“It *is* true, then,” he said. “You have come.” He spoke in a tone so low, so feeble, that she had to stoop over him to hear. “I never expected *that*. But there is no one like you.”

“When I got your letter,” she said, “I felt that I could not stay away.”

“I should apologize to you for that—only I can't. It is so good to know you are here. I brought you under false pretenses, I am afraid. You have heard what they say now?”

“Yes—yes. Thank God.”

“And that I may get back my sight?”

“That you *certainly* will get it back. Yes, I have heard all. But you must be careful. You must not talk.” She started up as if frightened.

“Oh, don’t go,” he entreated eagerly. He clung to her hand. “For the little time you will be here, don’t leave me.” Then, anxiously, “How long can you stay?”

Miss Ffrench, without removing her hand from his, pulled a chair toward her and sat down.

“Mrs. Travers came with me,” she said. “And,” smiling, “we thought, if you would invite us, that we would stay a day or two to make sure that all was well with you.”

She waited for a reply, but none came. He pressed her hand feebly, and a sigh broke from him.

“I am too happy,” he whispered at last. Then, after a bit: “You think that a strange speech from me to you, after— But I have learned to reconcile myself to many things.” The shade that fell upon his face as he said this did not however agree with his words. “You have made up your mind about Durnsford?” he said.

She hesitated, and grew confused.

“Yes,” she said, nervously.

He sighed.

“When do you marry him?”

“Oh—never!” she cried, impetuously.

“Never! How is that?” He started violently, and she felt the fingers clasped round hers tighten their grasp.

“Speak!” he said.

Still she hesitated; then went on hurriedly, in a pretty, shame-faced fashion;

“Last night he proposed to me, and I accepted him. Then I went home and found your letter. I,” with a swift blush, “knew then that I should never marry him—never!”

She rose quickly as she made an end of this confession, and tried to release her hand from his. Gently, however; she could not try *very* hard, he was so weak.

“Joan, sit down again; don’t go?” he entreated.

“But indeed I must, for your own good. The nurse will be angry with me. Specially, she said, you were to beware of all excitement, and now there is quite a flush upon your face; you are not half so pale as when I first came in.”

“That shows what good you have done me.” And indeed his voice was wonderfully stronger. “Besides, you do not excite me,” he went on, fondly—“you give me rather rest and peace, and content. Ah! there is nothing like hope for medicine.”

“What is your hope now?” asked she, with a little laugh.

“To get well and strong, and marry you.”

“You have arranged it all your own way, certainly.”

“But my way is your way now, isn’t it?” whispered he, rather anxiously.

Perhaps she was afraid of that excitement she made mention of awhile ago, because she surrendered without another struggle.

“I suppose so!” she said, very gently.

He made an attempt to draw her to him. She blushed

again—an exquisite carmine this time—but she obeyed the weak command and stooped over him, and kissed him.

“My beloved!” murmured he.

* * * * *

When some time had gone by she said—

“I hope auntie will be satisfied now; and will take me back into her good graces. I have had a very bad time of it with her since—”

“Go on. I can bear it *now*. Since—you refused me!”

“I think I shall run down to Cheshire and tell her all about it.”

“Oh, no; *don’t!* Something tells me I shall get ill again directly you go. You can write it, can’t you? She is ever so much better, and good news of this kind is just the thing to pull her round at once. And *such* good news.” He ceased, as if too happy to go on; and then—“I wish I could see you,” he said. “Oh! the joy of thinking I shall—*soon*, after two interminable years. Are you changed, darling?”

“I don’t know. Not very much, I suppose.”

“What are you wearing? What color, I mean?”

“I don’t know that either,” said she, laughing. “It is one of those queer faded shades that every one raves about. It is neither white, nor blue, nor green. If you like,” said she, shyly, “I will put it away, and keep it to show you when your eyes are well again, that you may know just how I looked to-day. But indeed I have prettier gowns; and if I had known that you—But I was in such a hurry, and—*so* unhappy.” Her voice broke a little.

At this moment the nurse came in.

“I think, madame—” she began, gently.

“Oh, yes!—and so do I!” cried Miss Ffrench, rising nervously. “I only *hope* I haven’t stayed too long—that I haven’t done him any harm.”

“I think not,” said the kind nurse, with a little sympathetic smile, after she had had one good glance at the invalid.

* * * * *

He grew quite strong after awhile, and got back his sight too, and they were married, and were—nay, *are*—as happy as any two people who ever lived on earth.

He is always a little proud of the fact that she had made up her mind to marry him, even before she knew it was possible that his sight might be restored.

Sometimes he still talks of it to her.

“Do you know,” he said to her the other day, about a month after the son was born, “I think it was the very pluckiest thing of you! Women will do a good deal, I know; but to marry a blind man—”

“You were never so blind as I was,” interrupted she, fondly. “Just imagine, that I never saw then that I was in love with you! ‘None so blind,’ you know, ‘as those who *won’t* see!’ ”

ON TRIAL.

SHE was one of those girls who are perhaps more attractive than strictly pretty, because certainly her features had their faults. Her skin, however, was like satin—creamy, delicious, with a soft flush running through it; and over her low, broad brow her chestnut hair fell in a soft natural wave. No maid had ever cut it; it was in fact “born so,” and it blew from side to side as the wind listed, and was touched with gold here and there, and had indeed a good deal to do with her many conquests.

Her first season had pronounced her an undeniable success; which meant that to her brother, Lord Hartley, she became at once a decided anxiety. She was never now without one, or rather two, young men dangling after her wherever she went, not only to balls and “at homes” in town, but to the Tyrol or the Highlands afterward, and wherever the Hartleys might chance to go. It was indeed Lady Hartley’s private opinion that had they elected to go to Hudson’s Bay for the winter there these young men would have appeared up to time, and ready as ever to fall down and worship her sister-in-law.

And they weren’t always the same two young men either; that added to the grievance. Miss Charteris had many little ways, but the cleverest of all was the little way

in which she used to get rid of a suitor when he grew importunate. This cleverness was hardly appreciated by Lady Hartley, upon whom fell, as a rule, the task of consoling and smoothing down the discarded one. She was thus compelled to think a good deal about Sophy, off and on, and just now she was particularly anxious about her, because she feared she was going to decline the best match of the year. Lady Hartley was young herself, and was not without sympathy and affection for her sister-in-law, but she certainly thought her very foolish; and she didn't in the least know how to manage her. She was a very nice woman, if a trifle plaintive, and given to looking at the unwearable side of things. She was a good woman too, intensely devoted to her nursery, as a good woman should be, but she was, perhaps, a trifle dull.

Just now she was worrying over two things; the baby's teething, which exercised her mind quite as much as though she had not seen three other babies get through the same obnoxious process, and her fear that Sophy would at the last refuse Lord Elston's hand—and very handsome rent-roll. She was divided between these two anxieties, when the door opened and Sophy herself entered the room.

"Anything the matter, Molly?" asked she, after a cursory glance at Lady Hartley's inexpressive features. The latter had been christened a decorous Mary by an archbishop, but Miss Charteris insisted on calling her Molly, which of course was a trial. She came across the room now with her usual light, swift step, and leaned over the back of Lady Hartley's chair.

"Are the children all right?" she asked. "Baby's

tooth through yet? You look as if some one had given you a severe scolding."

"I have many things to worry me," said Lady Hartley, with a sigh. "And, of course, I can not help feeling anxious about baby."

"That big, fat baby!" said Miss Charteris, laughing. "Dear Molly, how silly! It is merely his teething—*I hope*—that induces him to give way to those wild fits of diabolical temper."

"Oh, no! He is not ill-tempered. He has the temper of a very angel," interrupted the mother, reproachfully. "It is all, I am convinced, the fault of that coral his grandmother sent him."

"Then why let him have it? Why not get him a proper ring? Edith never has any others. A thick, soft india-rubber ring. It is not pretty, but babies like it, which, of course, is everything."

"And how am I to get one in this out-of-the-way place?" returned Lady Hartley, helplessly.

"I'll write to George. He is coming down for these theatricals, you know, the day after to-morrow, and he shall bring it."

"George!" Lady Hartley repeated, regarding her anxiously. "Do you mean to tell me you write to George?"

"Now and then."

"After all that passed between you last spring? Do you think Lord Elston would like it, if he heard of it?"

"I don't know, so I can't say."

"Sophy!" said Lady Hartley, in a solemn tone, "I do

hope you are not going to do anything foolish with regard to Elston!"'

"I hope not, indeed," said Miss Charteris, with a solemnity that put her sister's in the shade, but she rather spoiled it by laughing afterward.

"It is distinctly wrong of you to encourage George. And you *must* know," waxing a little warm, "that even one line from you in his present frame of mind will be sufficient to waken all the old regret. Now, Sophy, tell me one thing, do you or do you not like Lord Elston?"'

Miss Charteris employed herself for a moment or two in looking deeply into the fire. Then she said, with the most indifferent air in the world:

"I'm not sure."

"That terrible sentence!" cried Lady Hartley, impatiently; "I'm tired of it. Invent another, I beseech you. No, don't stand there. Come round here where I can see you. Do you know that chronic state of yours of not being sure is causing you to be rather too freely discussed by your friends? And for a girl to be talked about—that, you will admit, is undesirable. And you know, too, that when people once begin to talk they never know where to stop."

"I do, indeed," returned Miss Charteris, with a comical glance at her.

"You mean that for me, of course. But I don't mind. I shall do my duty, whatever comes of it. And now, what fault do you see in Lord Elston?"'

"He is too rich and too jealous."

"His jealousy proves his love. And if riches stand in

his way, why, it is the first time I ever knew them regarded as an objection. And you should be the last to say that. You know you said last year you refused George because he was too poor."

"That only shows how I hate extremes. George *is* too poor; Lord Elston too rich."

"Nonsense. I begin to think you have still a secret kindness for George."

"I hope you are wrong. As, in spite of the passion you think he still entertains for me, I hear he has fallen a victim to the *beaux yeaux* of that youngest Miss Wolverton. Ah! Molly, I fear my swains are not so faithful as yours were."

"I trust that what you tell me is true. If, indeed, you do not think of George, why can't you make up your mind to Elston?"

"I have told you. Never mind what I said about his money—if you will have my real reason—it is his jealous disposition that I dread. How could I expect happiness with a man who suspects me of—of all sorts of things the moment I am out of his sight?"

"Of flirting with other men, you mean. You can not deny, Sophy, that you have given him cause."

"Well, not for a long time now. Not lately; yet he is as suspicious as ever."

"Once married that would be all at an end."

"So you think. No; I should be afraid to venture."

"Is that your only reason for hesitating?"

Miss Charteris blushed and then laughed lightly.

"You ask me a good deal," she said. "Well, even if

I do confess to its being an only one, surely it is as strong as twenty smaller ones. There! I sha'n't submit to any further cross-examination. I shall go and give George directions about that ring."

She moved toward the door. Lady Hartley called after her.

"Don't be too hard on him," she said. "You know you wouldn't like it were he utterly devoid of jealousy. Give him a chance. Why not find some way of putting him on trial for a certain time, to test him?"

"But I know of no plan," returned Sophy, carelessly.

As she crossed the hall the door of the library opened, and a young man came toward her. He was tall and well made and about twenty-nine. He was dressed in tennis flannel and held a racket in his hand. He had very dark, earnest eyes, and these lit up as he saw Miss Charteris.

"I was just going to look for you, Sophy. Come out, and let me give you a beating."

"I like that!" said she, contemptuously. "Put it the other way round and I may be able to understand you. No, I can't go yet. I should like a game, but there is something I must do first."

"There always is," returned he, in an aggrieved tone. "As a rule I always come off second best with you."

"And quite right, too," she laughed, saucily.

"I wonder if you care for me at all?" said Elston, in a gloomy sort of way.

"Yes, I do," returned she, "*sometimes.*"

"Which means that I annoy you '*sometimes.*' Is that it? Why are you silent, Sophy? Tell me my sin."

"Would you really have me tell you?" asked she, gravely, lifting her eyes to his.

"I would, indeed."

"Why, then," said she, softly, "beware, my lord, of jealousy."

"Jealous! You think me jealous!" exclaimed he. "Why, I believe I am the least jealous man on earth. Were it otherwise, you—" He stopped abruptly.

"Go on," said she, a little haughtily. "Were it otherwise you think I should give you food for it; but you forget that there is no reason why I should study your wishes. You have no claim on me."

This was a little cruel of her, but she was angry.

"I know that," he said, humbly. He regarded her with a keen reproach. "Sophy! will you never give me that claim?"

"I tell you I should be afraid," said Miss Charteris, softened in a degree by that submissive glance, but still rather impatiently. . "A jealous man is a terrible thing."

"I think you misjudge me. Of course, very naturally, I should like all your smiles to be my own, but I do not really believe I am the irrational creature you would portray me. Try me, Sophy. Give yourself to me and I do not think you will repent it."

He had taken her hand, and now, holding it fast, sought to read her eyes. But she kept them religiously lowered. Still she did not draw her hand away, and it was evident that she hesitated. It even seemed to him, by the yielding of her lips, that she was almost on the point of speech that

would declare her won, when suddenly she moved back from him and shook her charming head. There was a new light in her eyes as she looked up, as though she had come to some strange resolution.

"I shall put you on trial first," she said, gayly. Lady Hartley's last words, though still so fresh in her mind, were already bearing fruit. "Do not look so frightened," she went on, smiling. "Your probation shall not be too prolonged. Just one small week! If during those seven days you prove yourself three times *unreasonably* jealous of any act of mine, you will—"

"*Three* times! Oh, absurd!" he said, hastily. "You can not really imagine me so senseless as that."

"I am generous, you see," said she, calmly. "As you yourself admit, I give you a large margin. Perhaps," with a slight but charming blush, "I do not wish you to fail. Well! *No!* Stay just there and listen. If you *should* chance to sin thus three times you will give me your word to relinquish forever all hope of—well, of—oh, you know!" she said. "On the other hand, if you do not sin thrice, I for my part will promise to—"

"Yes, go on," entreated he, eagerly. "You will give yourself to me as my reward. Is that it?"

"Let it be so," said she, smiling prettily, while her blush deepened. He bent over her hands and kissed them with a fond and tender passion.

"I did not think this morning that midday would see me so happy a man," he said, with glad triumph, his dark eyes alight.

"Do not boast," said she, warningly. But she smiled as she warned, and he heeded only the smile.

"This is Thursday. This day week I shall envy no man."

She ran away from him, up two or three steps of the staircase, but his voice compelled her to stop.

"Don't be long," he entreated; and there was hope and joy and new life in his tone.

"About ten minutes. If you don't mind waiting about for a bit, I'll join you, then."

He did "wait about," for such a considerably longer "bit" than the ten minutes named that he was a trifle restless and impatient when at last she did appear. She tripped down as unconcernedly as possible, however, with a letter in her hand.

"Oh! it was *that* kept you," said he, casting a wrathful glance at the letter. "To whom were you writing?"

Miss Charteris raised her brows, and then looked amused. "What a singularly rude question," she said.

He colored. "Was it rude? Why?"

"For the simple reason that I might not care to tell you."

"Why should you not care?"

To this she made no answer beyond a little swift glance as she moved toward the post-bag that lay on a side table. By some accident her hand brushed against the heavy fronds of a large fern, and the letter fell to the ground, address uppermost.

It was quite impossible that he could prevent himself

from seeing it. The writing was singularly large and legible for a woman, and

“*The Hon. George Markham,*

“*The Albany,*

“*London.*”

was so clear that it might have been print of a good type. His face was as dark as night as he picked it up and returned it to Miss Charteris.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he said.

“Certainly not. It was my awkwardness. Still, as you know, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, and—you have had your curiosity gratified.” She was a little flushed as she spoke—a fact that Elston saw and dwelt upon.

“I have seen what I had no desire to see,” he answered, stiffly.

“Well, why *shouldn’t* I write to George?” she asked, a touch of defiance in her tone. “He is a very old friend.” She was a little put out by the whole affair.

“Why, indeed? I am bound, of course, to remember that he was first in the field.”

“Oh! If you put it that way!” she said. She turned sharply away, and then as suddenly stopped. “I suppose,” indignantly, “you think I ought to open that letter and show you the contents.”

“I do,” returned he, boldly.

“You suspect me, then?”

“I should certainly like to see what you have written to Markham. You call him an old friend, but you must

acknowledge he was rather more than that to you a year ago."

"Not more to me—whatever I may have been to him." She paused, and then throwing up her head, regarded him fixedly. "You remember our compact of a while since?" she asked. "Such a *little* while. A bare half hour, I think. You remember it?"

He paled perceptibly.

"Is *this* jealousy?" she said.

"You spoke of jealousy without reason. Am I now unreasonable? Have you proved me so?"

"Have you proved that you are *not* so? How do you know what this letter contains. There is such a thing as Time, *that* will prove which of us is right."

There was scorn in her glance as she looked at him and threw down her racket upon a hall chair.

"A week!" she said, bitterly. "I should have made it a *day*! Already—though but a few minutes have passed—you have transgressed once."

She cast one last reproachful glance at him, which betrayed the fact of her eyes being full of tears, and then left him.

Although totally unconvinced and inwardly raging against George Markham, fear of Sophy's displeasure had such a hold on Lord Elston, that he determined to subdue himself and give her no further cause for anger. Whatever happened, whatever she might choose to do, he would be blind and deaf to it until this momentous week was at an end. Once his, he thought, all would be right. Dur-

ing the evening, therefore, he so managed to conduct himself that Miss Charteris, outwardly at least, forgave him.

The next day brought an influx of visitors for the private theatricals impending, and in which Sophy was to bear a principal part. Elston, having no talent that way, was, of course, shut out from the frequent rehearsals that, after the arrival of the last contingent, went on morning, noon and night. He certainly objected to the absorption of Sophy's time, but he was still so careful to avoid a second offense, that he pretended a deep interest in the play, which secretly was a thing of detestation to him.

Among the actors there was a tall, angular young man, with a glowing eye, a Roman nose, and a tragic expression. This latter was perhaps born of a belief in his own histrionic powers, and the opinion of a few friends of his that he was the very image of Mr. Irving. He was, at all events, the leading spirit of the theatricals that just then possessed the guests at Hartley Court. His manner was impressive, and he had acquired a trick of taking people aside into corners and recesses, behind screens and palms, and there whispering to them in a solemn, earnest fashion that precluded the idea of frivolity.

By degrees it became noticeable that it was generally Miss Charteris who was drawn by him behind the Japanese screens and branching palms. But as the mysterious conferences were presumably about the play in which she was to take the principal rôle, and as she seemed to bear up wonderfully under the infliction of these repeated interviews, no one felt called upon to go to her rescue. Lord Elston writhed beneath it all, yet made no sign. For two

whole days, indeed, he suffered torments, betraying no temper, and putting in rather mechanical smiles in the right places; but on the third day an event occurred that destroyed his newly formed resolves to endure all things, rather than again show himself distrustful of his lady-love.

On the top of the small hill at the very end of the fruit garden, a glass house had been built that was specially dedicated to pelargoniums. It was rather far from the house, and, therefore, seldom visited by any people staying at Hartley; but Elston, who was fond of this particular flower, strolled up sometimes to look at them, although it was growing toward the end of July, and their first loveliness was almost at an end. It was the Monday following that eventful Thursday, on which Miss Charteris had put him on his trial, that he went up to the pelargonium-house to try and while away the time until he could hope again to see Sophy. Ever since these wretched amateurs had descended upon the house she had been conspicuous by her absence from eleven to luncheon—studying her part in her own room, as Lord Elston fondly, if erroneously, believed.

At some distance from it, but on a line with the eastern end of the glass house, ran a hedge of laurel sufficiently thick to conceal the approach of any one coming from that side. Elston, walking leisurely toward it, became all at once conscious that a voice—the voice, indeed, in all the world for him—was sounding somewhere near. He looked through a large hole in the hedge and discovered that Miss Charteris was in the house—the door of which was open—and that she was not alone! The tragic young man was with her!

With her! Inadequate explanation! He was on his knees to her!

Elston felt his color forsake him; his breath come and go with difficulty; his limbs tremble beneath him—as he took in the fatal scene. Yes! There he was, kneeling before her, a whole world of despairing love in his eloquent eyes, now more aglow than ever. He was holding her hand in both of his in quite a frenzied fashion, and, even as Elston gazed, spell-bound, he proceeded to devour it with kisses.

And she! perfidious girl! How did she receive his insolent advances? With the withering scorn they deserved? With a gesture of hatred and aversion? No! She turned her head coyly to one side and permitted him without rebuke to press the lovely hand upon which he—Elston—only a minute since had been tenderly dwelling as upon a priceless treasure that yet some day might be his. There was a curious expression, too, upon her false face, as though she were waiting with a girlish bashfulness for a word from him that should decide her fate.

It came at last. Not one, but many words in a very torrent of wild entreaty.

“ My beloved! My most adored one!” cried he, in tones loud and clear; remarkably so, indeed—no doubt on account of the intensity of his emotion. “ Do not consign me to despair—and an early grave. A single word of hope is all I dare demand. Grant it, ere I perish. Tomorrow will see me over the border; let me take with me into my enforced exile one smile, one blessed assurance that you are not altogether indifferent to me!”

He waited her reply in apparently breathless suspense. So did Elston. Slowly—very slowly, she pressed her handkerchief to her averted face.

"If I only dared believe you would be true," she faltered, very distinctly.

Elston stayed to hear no more. Stricken, crushed by this perfidy, in one he had esteemed so highly, he turned his steps backward and went blindly down the path by which he had ascended—to his doom. He scarce knew whither he went. On and on he walked through the shady garden, until at last he came to a high stone wall—only recognizing that, indeed, when his nose came nearly in contact with it. He could not go through it, and it was impossible to climb it, so perforce he pulled himself up and began to retrace his steps. This he did, still in a blind fury of rage and grief, that burst into open flame as a turn in a path brought him suddenly face to face with Sophy.

She was coming toward him, and was singing—actually singing—in a blithe, sweet, careless way, a new ballad that had taken her fancy of late. With one hand she was holding up her gown—in the other was a big red rose that she was swinging lightly to and fro. She looked like one who was without a care in the world—or a regret—or a remorse. One could see her dainty feet in their Parisian shoes and hear the click-clack of the high heels, as she tripped down the little hilly pathway. She seemed indeed at the moment the very incarnation of all sweetness and light. When she saw Elston she stopped singing and smiled instead.

" You here! And at this hour!" cried she. " Traitor! Have you found me out, then?"

Such hardihood! Such effrontery!

" Yes. And in time," returned he, standing still and gazing at her with concentrated wrath on his pale face. Then his anger burst all bounds. " How do you *dare* to speak to me?" he said, in a low but terrible tone. Miss Charteris drew back.

" What on earth has happened? Are you mad?" she said.

" Sane rather—at last. This morning I was mad, indeed. Then I believed in you. Now—" He threw out his hand with a gesture that would have done credit to the tragic young man himself. " Now—I know all."

" It seems to be a good deal," remarked Miss Charteris, composedly, though her face had lost its color. " It is also evidently of much interest. May I hear it?"

" This persistent deception is unworthy—nay, rather, *worthy* of you," cried he, bitterly. " Learn then that just now I saw you and—and that mountebank in the glass house above."

" I don't know any mountebank. I am therefore more at sea than ever." As she said this in her iciest tones, his lordship regarded her with undisguised disdain.

" You know one, at all events," he said. " His name is Pelham." Then his rage broke forth again. " I tell you I saw him on his knees to you—swearing, protesting, how he loved you, while you—you—listened to him, you encouraged him. I did not wait for the end, but your manner left me no doubt that you accepted him."

Miss Charteris struggled with herself for a moment, and then burst out laughing. There was a good deal of irrepressible amusement in this laughter, but there was more anger.

"I see," she said. "And so you think you surprised Captain Pelham making love to me? Now listen"—she dropped her rose, and drawing a little paper volume from her pocket, opened it with much deliberation at a certain page, and began to read out aloud:

"My beloved! My most adored one! Do not consign me to despair"—and so on to the end of what he had heard behind the laurel hedge. As she proceeded his face changed. First it grew blank, then crimson. Then a wild hope sprung into it that had to do battle with a great shame. When Miss Charteris had finished to the last word she paused, folded the play with irritating precision, and returned it to her pocket.

"You have done me and Captain Pelham much honor," she said, coolly. "It is certain that in *your* eyes at least, we shall pass muster as very tolerable actors." She swept by him as she spoke, and went on her way to the gate beyond, cruelly unconcerned in manner. She even took up and continued the song she had been singing, from the very part where she had broken off. She was in nowise disconcerted or put out. This indifference was terrible.

He hurried after her and caught her up just under the hanging ivy of the gate-way.

"One word," he entreated, miserably. "You gave me three chances. You remember that?"

"Yes. I also remember that two of them are at an end."

"Oh, no. That first one, it has not been *proved* unreasonable."

"I told you not to depend too much on that. On Thursday next you shall *see* that objectionable letter." She would barely look at him, and his heart sunk. If she could show him that letter, there must indeed have been nothing in it to justify his jealousy! Still there was one more chance left him. He took courage.

"You blame me," he said, in a low voice. "But you might know that if I did not love you as I do, you would not have to blame me. I pray you to remember that."

She made him no answer to this, beyond a swift glance he found it difficult to translate; and a moment later she had passed through the little ivied gate into the flower-garden beyond, and he had not then the courage to follow her.

He stayed behind, therefore, and upbraided himself fiercely. He took himself to task in a shower of genuine abuse. He absented himself from luncheon, and at dinner it took him quite a little time to make up his mind about even glancing at her when he found her on his other side. He did manage it, however, and looked so long that she was at length obliged to notice him. After that, touched perhaps by the unhappiness of his eyes, she softened toward him, and to his intense surprise and gratitude was considerably kinder than he deserved.

The next day went smoothly without a single hitch; and if at eleven o'clock he winced inwardly as he thought of

the two who were then in all probability among the pelargoniums, he was very careful not to betray it. He was happier, too, in spite of all this than he had been for some time. Miss Charteris toward evening grew very nearly her old sweet self again. Nay, more than that. It seemed to Elston that she was softer, tenderer in her manner to him than she had ever been before; that her eyes rested on his with a more lingering regard; and once, when he unexpectedly turned his glance in her direction, he caught her looking at him, and surprised the vivid blush with which she turned aside.

His hopes rose high, and he came down-stairs next morning, Wednesday, happy in the knowledge that only one more day lay between him and the fulfillment of his fondest desire. Certainly that third sin should not find him out, for the simple reason that he would not commit it. He would be calm, circumspect. It was, indeed, impossible that he should ever feel jealousy about her again.

It was perhaps a little shock to him to find George Markham at breakfast when he got down. He had arrived by an early train, and as Elston entered the room, was just saying "How d'ye do" to Miss Charteris. She was a girl who spoke very distinctly, and Elston could hear what she was saying. She was smiling in very friendly wise at Markham, though her manner was suspiciously reproachful.

"I thought you were never coming," she said. "How you put it off from day to day. And when you *knew* why I wanted you." After that she and Markham entered into, and were apparently lost in, an engrossing discussion that

lasted until breakfast, a rather prolonged meal at Hartley, was at an end.

Lord Elston could not forget that once this man had been Sophy's avowed lover. He had, indeed, according to all accounts, been her devoted slave. He looked uncommonly like a slave still—following her about and giving himself up to her, as it were, for the entire morning. Pelham, in spite of his expression and tragic powers, was nowhere. Markham monopolized her all through, getting her to show him the new fish-pond and tennis-court and otherwise making himself specially disagreeable.

Miss Charteris, however, did not seem to find him disagreeable at all. She seemed, on the whole, very glad to be with him. She introduced him to Elston with quite a little flow of pleasure in her manner, and said ecstatically that it was "very nice to see two old friends of hers with each other." This was putting Markham in the same category with himself—when surely *he*, Elston, was more than a friend.

Feeling rather disconsolate after luncheon, he broke away from one or two of the other guests, who wanted him to join them in a long drive to some distant abbey, and, lighting a cigarette, wandered into one of the conservatories. Sophy, he had discovered, was not going to this abbey, neither was Markham—a fact in itself suspicious. He was feeling distinctly gloomy as he stepped into the region of flowers, and without giving a thought to their beauty, paced slowly up and down. It was at his second turn that his eyes, moodily lowered to the ground, fell upon an object that instantly riveted all his attention.

A letter, wide open, and written in a large, sprawling hand. The beginning was at the other side, of course, but what now caught his eye was enough.

"a moment sooner. Hurried my best. But those lawyer fellows are impossible to move. I will bring the ring, but only hope it isn't too large. It looks enormous. However, as it is my first purchase of the kind, you must forgive me if I have erred in any way. Ever, dear Sophy, yours, G. Markham."

The writing was so large that he read it from where he stood. He read it unconsciously. His eyes had fallen upon it, and, before he was aware of it, the sense of the words had entered into his brain. What was he to do now? He was a little frightened at the strange feeling that took possession of him. It was not rage, or grief, or disappointment. It was something far worse than all. He hardly realized at first that it was despair.

"Lawyers." He wondered dimly if it were her marriage settlement they were so slow about. "His first purchase of the kind." Very natural. It isn't every day a man buys a wedding-ring. He hadn't a doubt in his mind but that it was a wedding-ring to be placed on Sophy's finger by Markham.

He was not angry *this* time. He was only cold and stunned. For the first time in all his life he was entirely without hope. He wondered in a dull sort of way that he had never until now discovered how much Sophy was to him.

He was still staring at the cruel letter, though with eyes that saw not, when Sophy herself entered the conservatory. Of course she saw the letter, and instantly stooped to pick it up.

"I seem to be dropping my possessions all over the place," she said. "My Syrian bangle in the garden half an hour ago—good gracious! What is the matter now?" She had caught a glimpse at Elston's face, and it electrified her. Indeed, it made a picture.

"Don't let us go into it, Sophy," he said, brokenly. "Why should I distress you? It was all my own folly from first to last, I dare say. I should have seen—have known—"

"But *what?*" demanded she, as he paused; he felt indeed unequal to going on, and looked so altogether strange and down-hearted that Miss Charteris was unnerved. "What is it? Tell me," she said. He pointed to the letter she still held in her hand.

"If you had only told me," he cried. "Oh, Sophy! was it then so great an amusement to you to break my heart?"

"To break—" She gazed at him, lost in perplexity. Vaguely her eyes wandered to the letter, the word "ring" caught her eye; in a moment the whole truth flashed upon her. A warm crimson sprung to her cheek, and I regret to say she so far forgot herself as to stamp her pretty shoe upon the tessellated pavement.

"You are really *maddening!*" she cried. "You are beyond pardon." She might, and in all probability, would, have said a great deal more, had not the sound of

an approaching footstep checked her. She turned her head to see George Markham.

"George," she said, sweetly, with a complete change of tone and expression, "would you mind bringing me that—that little message I wrote to you about last Thursday? Bring it *here*. Lady Hartley has it, I think. Get it from her."

"Oh, the ring," said Mr. Markham; and he went back again the way he had come, whistling idly. Miss Charteris, in his absence, employed herself thrumming in a rather vicious manner upon the pane nearest to her. She did not look at Elston, who was deadly silent, with an awful growing fear full upon him that he had been for the third, and fatal time, mistaken! Presently Markham returned and laid something in her hand.

"I had a battle royal to get it," he said, laughing. "It appears baby lives by it alone. It is a huge success, Lady Hartley says, 'an you love her, don't keep it long.'"

Still laughing, he lounged away, through the outer door, down the steps, and into the garden. When he was quite gone, Sophy advanced on Lord Elston. She then opened her pretty pink palm and held it out to him. A curious object lay on it.

"There is *the ring!*?" she said, in a voice untranslatable.

It was a terrible thing. A hateful wormy sort of thing, made of gutta-percha; but if hideous, at least innocent—innocent, no doubt, because hideous. It was black and soft and bendable, and big enough to fit a giant's thumb. Elston gazed at it as if fascinated, and at last, in spite of

the pride that would have held him silent, was constrained to speak.

“What is it?”

“Baby’s teething-ring,” returned she, slowly. When she had proved to him his guilt, she did not try to leave him, but stood erect, her beautiful figure drawn up to its fullest height, a strange gravity upon her beautiful lips.

“This is the third time,” she said, at last, in a low tone, as though speaking to herself. He started violently. Noticing this, she let her eyes rest more fully on him and went on slowly: “Your probation, my lord, is at an end.”

“So is my life,” said he.

“As for that first chance—that letter of mine—you shall see it now, as I promised.”

“Oh! no, no,” he said, entreating her by a gesture not to go into that. “I understand. I submit. I am surely unfortunate enough.”

She hesitated for a moment, and then said:

“You remember our compact?”

“And all it means to me. Have I not told you so? Spare me, I beseech you, what you can.”

“This is the final throw, and you have lost.”

“Everything? All is over, then, between us?”

“All!”

She made a little impetuous movement, and he, interpreting it, moved to the door and flung it wide for her to pass through. With her would go all his hopes, his desires. Nothing would remain, save that saddest of all things, memory.

He stood, his eyes downcast, waiting for her to go. He

felt numbed, stupid; but presently it *did* dawn down upon him that it was strange she should keep him so long in attendance on her. Whilst he thus mused, a voice, soft, sweet, unsteady, fell upon his ears.

"Arthur," it said.

He let the door go and looked at her. She had covered her face with her hands, and was crying quietly but bitterly. In a second she was in his arms.

"My darling! my darling!" whispered he. "Has it hurt you so much? Has it so grieved you? Oh, Sophy, do not cry like that! In time you will forget all this and —me."

"Ah! that is just it," sobbed Miss Charteris, indignantly; "I can't forget you. And to think you would have let me go *forever*, without another word—another glance—oh, I would not have *believed* it of you!"

"Sophy, do you know what you are saying? After *all*, is there a chance for me?"

He was very pale as he looked at her.

"Yes, a fourth," said she, smiling through her tears. "And then—oh, no," she cried, nervously, "we won't have any more trials; I hate them. But you *will* try to be good now, won't you?"

"I don't think I shall ever offend you again, Sophy; I don't, indeed."

"Very well," said she. "That is a promise, mind; and now I must run away and give back this ring to Lady Hartley."

"Ah! talking of rings," said he, a little awkwardly; "there—there is something I want to say to you. On

Thursday last I was so *sure* I should not fall into disgrace that I telegraphed to town, and," fumbling in his pocket, "got you this. You will wear it now, Sophy?"

"*This*" was a very exquisite ring, altogether different from that horrid black thing which had wrought such mischief.

"Oh! how lovely!" cried Miss Charteris, who was not above raptures where diamonds were concerned. "Oh, Arthur, *thank you!*"

He slipped it on her finger—*the* finger—and she regarded it with most satisfactory delight.

"It is I who should thank you," said he, tenderly, "for deigning to accept it. But—but if I were to thank a person, Sophy, I should do it more warmly than you."

She cast a little, swift, shy glance at him and blushed crimson. She hesitated, then moved a step nearer to him, and lifted her face slightly.

It was their first kiss, but not their last.

THEIR LAST RESOURCE.

CHAPTER I.

"OH! it is *more* than unfortunate. I don't believe I ever was so disappointed in my life. If it had happened any other evening but this—and at the last moment, too! It is really *too* bad." Tears of mortification stood in her eyes.

"Only what one should expect from a servant," said her sister, the Hon. Mrs. Trevenning, smoothing down a fold of her exquisite ball-gown and frowning slightly. "They are ever and always the most troublesome set on earth. It often occurs to me that they do things *on purpose!* Would any one, I ask you, except one's coachman, elect to break his collar-bone at ten o'clock on the night of the best ball of the season? I should think not, indeed. It is just the little bit too much."

"If you had only refused leave to Thomas this morning!"

"What could I do, my good child? He said his mother was dying, and I suppose even a footman has feelings. One daren't be brutal nowadays."

"It looks like an artfully planned design," said Miss Dare, indignantly. She stood before a mirror that reached from floor to ceiling in her sister's boudoir, and surveyed

her slender figure, clad in its perfect gown, with a glance of the deepest melancholy. "To think of the hours I have spent over this dress," she said. "I believe I wore Vrière nearly to death's door; and all for nothing. No one will see it to-night."

"Well, there is nothing to be gained by crying over it," declared Mrs. Trevenning, with a touch of impatience. "My gown is as good as yours any day, and is just as likely to blush unseen so far as to-night is concerned. I only wish I knew how I was to pay for it. Make up your mind to the inevitable, Connie, which means staying at home for this evening at least."

"I can't," declared Connie, desperately. "I have dwelt too long upon this one ball to feel resigned to its loss all in a second. Oh, if *anything* could be done—"

Here the door was flung wide, and a tall young man in a morning suit of gray tweed came into the room. He was rather dark, and very like Mrs. Trevenning.

"What! *You*, Dudley?" cried she. "And at this hour? Why, where have you come from?"

"The Manor, straight. The old boy is better, so I left him nursing *the* leg, and ran up to town to have a little fling before the season says good-bye. How specially festive you two look! Going anywhere?"

Mrs. Trevenning reseated herself with a little groan, and Constance made a gesture of despair.

"By Jove! Who's dead? What's wrong?" asked their brother, very properly impressed by this display of feeling.

"Everything. Everything!" cried Constance. "This very instant we have had word sent us that Martin the

coachman fell in the stable half an hour ago and broke his collar-bone; Thomas, Vivienne's new footman, started early this morning to attend his mother's sick-bed; and here we are, dressed to go out, and not a soul to drive us. It is the Duchess of Dartrie's ball, and the princess is to be there, and Viv and I got new gowns for it, and—altogether—it *is* a shame, isn't it?"

"The deuce of a sell," said Sir Dudley, with honest sympathy. "But why not try a cab for once?"

Constance looked hopefully at her sister, but Mrs. Trevenning shook her handsome head.

"Impossible! We have promised, for one thing, to call for Helen; and besides, to go there in a *cab*! Oh! no, I couldn't do that."

"Well, Dudley, think of something else—do," implored his younger sister: she was his favorite, and a very pretty girl. "You might try to help us," she said. Her face was quite tragical, and Sir Dudley, looking at it, laughed.

"Well,—I will," he said. "Tell you what I'll do. Get me old Martin's coat and gloves and hat, and I'll drive you myself."

Miss Dare cast a reproachful glance at him as though disbelieving; but Mrs. Trevenning sprung to her feet and clapped her hands.

"The very thing," cried she. "Dudley, you have saved us!" She ran to the bell, and rang it sharply. "I'll order the regimentals to your old room, and the carriage to the door at once. If you tuck the rug carefully round your knees nobody will notice your trousers."

"I earnestly hope that no one will notice *me*," said Sir Dudley. "That's the principal thing!"

"Good heavens, yes!" said Mrs. Trevenning. "Dear Dudley, do be cautious. Fancy if any one were to recognize you, and it were to come out in one of those detestable society papers. What an imbroglio!" There was a gleam of hope in her eye.

"It would set you up for life," said Sir Dudley, calmly. "Consider how you would be run after and pointed out for months to come. What greater bliss could fall to the share of any woman?"

His raillery was kindly, and Mrs. Trevenning, who in secret hankered wildly after notoriety, took no notice of it, beyond making a little *moue* as she passed him.

Later on, when they interviewed him in the hall preparatory to starting, he was found to be quite satisfactory. The light tweed trousers certainly militated against the perfection of his toilet, but they trusted to the friendly rug to hide this discrepancy.

"Whatever you do, don't get *down*," said Mrs. Trevenning, who began to feel something of the delight of private theatricals. "And for goodness' sake, don't forget your rôle for a moment. When you are opening the door for Helen, be sure you touch your hat."

"Yes 'm," said Sir Dudley, in the most approved style; after which they all got down to the carriage, two maids full of a decorous hilarity bringing up the rear, armed with cloaks and fans.

The impromptu coachman was directed to drive first to Park Lane to pick up "Helen." "Who is Helen, what

is she?" thought Dudley, to whom the name conveyed no memories; but there was no time just then to ask questions. It was close on eleven o'clock. He felt rather glad he didn't know the lady mentioned, as, though it would have been difficult to make him feel shame about such an affair as this, he was obliged to confess to himself, once he was seated and had the reins in his hands, that he would be rather glad than otherwise when his self-imposed task was at an end. Yes, he wished himself well out of it. Why, if any of the other of the four-in-hand fellows were to see and recognize him, he should never hear the end of it. And these horses of Trevenning's were not his form at all. "Sorry nags," he called the slow, respectable, well-fed beasts, who went, thought he, as though they were mourning the corpse behind them.

"You will drive quietly, won't you, Dudley?" Mrs. Trevenning had said, nervously, as a last word. "Not as you do on that dreadful coach. Remember, now, like a darling boy."

The darling boy smiled grimly to himself as he drove along at a funeral pace. It suggested itself to him that if he laid down the reins and gave them their own sweet will they would go as well as he could drive them. But fortunately he abstained from this experiment, and consequently they arrived safely at the house appointed in Park Lane, where the unknown "Helen" was to be picked up.

Almost as they drew up there the hall door was opened and a tall slight figure muffled in an Eastern shawl ran down to the carriage.

"*At last!* I was quite afraid something had happened." The voice was girlish and very sweet, and had a curious vibration in it that thrilled the hearer. A servant followed her to open the carriage door, and whilst he was doing it Dare caught a glimpse of her face.

Such an exquisite face! Arch, yet tender, firm, yet soft. He had no time to criticise any special feature, so quickly she turned away and was swallowed up by the carriage, but he knew her eyes were as dark as her hair, and that if he lived forever he should never be able to forget that one sweet glimpse.

He heard, as if in a dream, some one telling him to go on again, and still in a dream he pursued his way through the lamp-lit streets, and presently drew up before an open door-way that shone more brilliantly than its companions on either side. He watched her from his post of vantage walk up the carpeted steps and disappear into the hall, and was conscious of a distant blank when the envious walls hid her from his sight.

Another carriage coming up behind obliged him to take the horses out of the way, or probably he would even now have been staring at the steps up which she had gone; circumstances, however, were too many for him, and he was compelled to retire speedily and with as little consideration for the new-born feelings that had sprung to life within him, as though he were in truth the hireling he simulated. How he got through the next few hours he never afterward remembered. All he could think of was this one fair woman; this Helen, of whom he knew nothing. Who was she? Was she Miss or Mrs.? His heart contracted as

he admitted the possibility of the latter title. He could get it all out of Mrs. Trevenning in the morning of course, but in the meantime he was lost in a miserable ignorance.

"Oh! Helen fair, beyond compare."

Would he ever know more of her than now he knew? He made one desperate effort to discover her identity, an effort that ended in dismal failure. Fate drove him up to a respectable middle-aged gentleman in his own (present) rank of life, who, reclining gracefully against an adjacent wall, smoked the peaceful pipe. Dare all his life had been told that nothing was hid from servants, and the idea grew upon him that perhaps this man might tell him something of the family residing in that particular house in Park Lane from which the lovely Helen had descended.

He made himself very specially charming to the respectable man for five minutes or so, during which he sustained the entire conversation, the respectable man being engrossed with the pipe, and evidently of a taciturn disposition. He was so reserved, indeed, that he quite won on Dare, who thought him modest, and, for his state of life, refined. After a few preliminaries, therefore, he asked him if he knew who lived in such and such a house, Park Lane.

The refined man had now come to an end of his pipe, and, as Sir Dudley discovered, was more equal to conversation than he had before supposed.

"Blest if I do," said he—"beyant the fact that t'ain't my gal's 'ouse. Reason of askin'? Soft on Parlor or Cookie, eh?"

Sir Dudley moved away. He now told himself he had been mistaken, and that the man had very bad manners; and he refrained from questioning any one else. No, he would trust to chance to reveal her to him.

It was the longest night he ever spent. He wondered whether they would *ever* get tired of dancing, and assured himself it was the last time he would place himself in such a predicament. He thought bitterly of Mrs. Trevenning's staying powers when she had found a partner that suited her, and of how Connie would be safe to meet Carlton there, and, given an isolated spot in a conservatory, would straightway forget that such an important thing as Time existed.

And Helen! Was she too—? Pshaw! that way madness lay. He would not believe but that he might yet have a chance of trying his fortune with her. He could not forget her face. It was love at first sight—and a terrible attack of it. He had sneered at such an idea when other men had spoken of it as being not only possible but probable, and now—

Helen! Helen of Troy. Pooh! he didn't believe that old-world beauty could have held a candle to this modern Venus. He was getting excited over the question, when some friendly person cried aloud for Mrs. Trevenning's carriage, and he drove up with quite a rush, and saw her of whom his thoughts were full come down the steps beneath a blaze of light into the shadow below.

As a matter of fact, five came down at the same moment, but Sir Dudley was too far gone to see more than one; which shows the exact difference that lies in giving

way to love, and wine. Constance Dare was accompanied by one young man who seemed decidedly *épris*, whilst another hung over “Helen” with an air of devotion that drove Sir Dudley to the verge of frenzy. To go for that man, to wrest from him his prize, was his sole desire. The reins slackened in his grasp, and he bent forward, oblivious of everything, in his anxiety to see what was going on beneath him. This brought him within the glare of the lamps, and the man talking to Constance, lifting his head suddenly, saw him.

“Why—what!” exclaimed he, spasmodically. Miss Dare, following his glance, caught his arm.

“Not a word, not a syllable. To-morrow I’ll explain—” whispered she, divided between fear and mirth.

This conquered peril was unknown to Sir Dudley, who still continued to glare at the back of his rival’s head, as he already designated “Helen’s” companion. Animal magnetism is a power, no doubt, and now it compelled the rival to turn his glance in the direction of Mrs. Trevenning’s coachman. Nothing came of this, however. Dudley caught sight of *his* face first, and, starting as if shot, faced round and fell into an attitude that was anything but easy, but which permitted him to devote his entire attention to the reins.

It was Tommy Mornington!—colonel in the Cold-streams, and the most notorious gossip about town. If he were once to get wind of this, and to—to retail it to *her* in his usual biting sarcastic way—(nasty way, by Jove!)—how should he ever be able to approach her? He kept his face

rigidly averted, even from her, and sat in durance vile, until Carlton, Connie's man, called out to him "Home." Was there a sense of smothered laughter in his tone?

He drew up with quite an old coachman-like touch at the house of Mrs. Trevenning, who got out of the carriage, as did Constance. He waited with an eager longing and a most unservant-like straining of the neck in the direction of the carriage-door to see fair Helen follow them. His astonishment became intense as he saw she did not appear, and that the other two were leaning toward the window, murmuring good-nights, and good-byes, numberless. He could even see that Mrs. Trevenning leaned forward as if to kiss some one, and then drew back and looked up at him. She was the image of Sir Dudley, and had the same merry daring look in her blue eyes.

"To Park Lane—Dud—Martin," said she, and he knew by her expression, which was mischievous, that the slip was a premeditated one, meant to frighten him. But he forgave her—for was she not rendering up to his sole care for a few sweet minutes the one perfect creature upon earth?

He didn't call the horses "sorry nags" this time. Their slowness delighted him. He drove with the utmost caution—the most extraordinary care. It even occurred to fair Helen within that the Trevennings' coachman was a leech of the first water, but he could not bring himself to hurry up the horses even to please her. They were alone, he and she, as utterly alone in the great heart of town as lover's soul could desire. Separated only by a miserable partition of wood and paint and padding—a

trumpery separation, that it delighted him to think he could smash into bits in no time.

In spite of himself, however, he had to get to the house at last, and with a pang he watched the tall slender figure go up to the hall door. She had left him—and this carriage, which from henceforth would be sacred to him. Should he ever see her again, once those doors opened to receive her?

Meantime the senseless doors seemed slow to grasp their prize. Fair Helen knocked, first in a reasonable way, then loudly—then louder still. She pulled the bell with a marvelous vigor for one so delicate in face and form. But answer came there none. Sir Dudley, very much against his will, sat holding the reins, longing yet fearing to go to her assistance, and glad in the thought that he need not leave her until he saw her safely in-doors. Presently it began to dawn upon him that this would not be immediately.

Again she knocked: again she rang with quite the same result. He was watching her anxiously, and now he saw that she turned her face to him with a suspicion of nervousness in her manner, as though she found comfort in the knowledge that he was still there. That glance undid him! The unconscious appeal in her eyes made him oblivious of all other considerations, and springing down from his seat he hastened to her side.

“Allow me,” he said, gently, and, taking the knocker from her fingers, beat a resounding rat-a-tat upon the door. He was delighted with the knocker. Action of any sort that would be in her service he was longing for just

then, and, nothing else presenting itself, he worked off this longing on the unoffending door. He was, indeed, so engrossed with his desire to awake the sleeping household that he quite forgot that state of life into which he had entered to oblige his sisters, and was therefore the more startled and confounded when presently he found her eyes fixed upon him with an intensity suggestive of astonishment. Her expression was a curious blending of surprise and bewilderment, and there was too, he thought, a little uneasiness in it.

It all flashed upon him in a second. There he stood, in the Trevanning livery from the knees up, and for the rest there were light tweed trousers and a pair of boots that servants as a rule do not aspire to! He became at the same time conscious that his gloves were absurdly too big for him, and that the hat was ludicrous on his head, at all events, whatever it might be on that of the venerable Martin. Truly this mad freak of his was costing him dear! In one wild moment he felt that to cut and run was all that was left him, but presently he rallied.

"I'm afraid they are all asleep, m'," he said, being so desirous of making a point of the respectful m' that he overdid it terribly, and left matters worse than they were before.

"I am afraid so too," replied she, steadily, though she still regarded him with an evident distrust, that seemed to grow as the moments waned. "My maid was to have sat up for me, but I suppose she— Will you knock again, please?"

He *did* knock again, with redoubled ardor this time. He was as anxious now as she was to get the confounded

door open. That distrustful glance had hurt him sorely. He felt all the time he was hammering away at the knocker that her eyes were fixed on the unlucky trousers, and as for the hat—once again memory rose to make him wretched. He recollect ed the fatal likeness that existed between him and Mrs. Trevenning, and he jammed down the big hat well over his brow with a view to concealing from her the family features. If he failed in this, he succeeded at all events in making himself grotesque in an unusually high degree.

The knocking rang through the empty air, and dying away, left an unnatural silence behind it. The day had broken, and now a still, pale, ghostly light crept slowly over the housetops and trembled through the street. The sweet cold smell of dawn came to them through all the smoke and depression of the great city beyond, and yet it seemed to them that the beauty of the fresh young morn had something of sadness in it. The stillness was almost oppressive. Fair Helen stood motionless, a little pale; while Sir Dudley, in his motley garments, waited with a throbbing heart for some sound—a footstep—inside this terrible door, that should put an end to a moment so charged with difficulties. What an unearthly quiet! Why did she not say something?

Suddenly, with an appalling yell such as a cat alone can give, a lean grimalkin rushed across the street and disappeared into some unseen corner. It was a wicked vengeful cry, and so startled fair Helen that she instinctively shrunk backward, and a faint exclamation broke from her lips.

"Oh! will they *never* open the door?" she said, faintly. He caught a hurried glance so full of nervous suspicion that it horrified him. Good heavens! That she should look at him like that. He could not tell, of course, that with the hat thus pressed upon his forehead, and coming down almost to his nose, he looked like nothing so much as a burglar, unless it might be a murderer; and felt a rather hurt astonishment that she should so unkindly regard him.

As he still pondered on this there came at last a distant sound from within; nearer it came, until there could be no mistake at all about its being a footstep.

"*Ah!*" cried she, with such an undeniable air of relief that Dudley knew himself finally crushed. The door was opened by a frightened, sleepy maid, and Helen stepped quickly into the safe shelter of the hall. As she went something fell from her with a tinkling sound upon the pavement. It was her fan. Sir Dudley stooped, picked it up, and handed it to her.

Standing under the hall lamp as she was, with some soft lace falling back from her dark head, and with a warm flush upon her cheeks, she looked even lovelier than he had before seen her. Was she as cruel as she was beautiful?

Perhaps she saw the touch of reproach in his eyes.

"Oh, thank you," she said, hurriedly, taking the fan. She made him a faint hesitating salutation—which afterward occurred to him as being somewhat strange—and he—*raised his hat!* *The hat!* Martin's hat! It was flabby at the brim, and there was a difficulty about the doing of

this every-day act, but certainly he *raised* it. Once again fair Helen fixed upon him a questioning gaze, more boldly this time because of the presence of her maid, and Sir Dudley, with the only bit of wisdom he had betrayed all through, beat a hasty retreat.

As he went home he wondered where he should see her again. Mrs. Trevenning would of course be able to manage it for him, but somehow he decided on saying nothing to either of his sisters about her. There would be Lady Bellingham's ball to-morrow night—nay, to-night, rather. She *might* be there; and if so, would she recognize him? This was an awful probability, and yet he could not bring himself to hope she would entirely forget him.

CHAPTER II.

HE had just completed a flowery little speech expected of him by Lady Bellingham, who still considered herself young and lovely, and had stepped aside to prop himself against a friendly wall, when he saw “her” enter the room—she was already only that eloquent pronoun to him. If fair on that last hour he saw her, she was ten times fairer to-night in a lace gown, diaphanous, ivory-tinted, with here and there a purple bunch of the big Ozar violet lost in its soft folds. She was smiling, and it seemed to Dare as if he had been blind to the sweetness of her eyes last night. Her skin was like the wild rose, and her hair strayed loosely over a thoughtful and therefore beautiful brow.

He went up to Lady Bellingham presently and asked for an introduction “to the charming girl over there in the white gown.”

“They are all in white frocks,” said Lady Bellingham, “like a set of silly *débutantes*. I never saw so much white in a room before. You will have to be a little more explicit.” She spoke petulantly. She was growing stouter every day, and white was now beyond her.

“I wish I could,” said Dudley, laughing. “But the fact is, I don’t know her name.” He had adhered to his resolution not to question his sisters about her. “See, there,” he went on, hastily—“there she is now, with Sir Charles Lamprey.”

“Oh! Helen. Helen Bellasis. She is a cousin of mine.” She glanced at him with an amused smile. “Another!” she said. “You are the ninth man who has implored my assistance, and she has been only five minutes in the room. She is a great success, isn’t she? This is her first season, and already everybody wants to marry her.”

Sir Dudley’s heart rose. She was not married—then! Immediately afterward it sunk to zero. If they were *all* at her feet, what chance had he?

“Be warned in time,” Lady Bellingham was saying, gayly. “She is a witch, a siren. Steel your heart, or, better still, flee temptation.”

“I feel how good it is of you to take all this trouble about me,” said Sir Dudley, mildly. “I am indeed grateful; but,” with a sudden smile, “if you can manage that introduction, I shall be even more grateful still.”

"You know no fear, then. You think yourself irresistible?" said she, with a shrug. "The world has spoiled you." And, indeed, Sir Dudley, being without incumbrances and master of a very pretty income, had known what it was to be affectionately treated by dowagers, maidens, and frisky matrons.

"Coming from you, that is unkind," replied he, in a low tone. "Have *you* found me 'irresistible'?" The tender reproach in his tone pleased her.

"Tut!" she said, throwing up her handsome head. And then: "Willful man must have his way, I suppose. Come, then, and let me make you known to Helen."

She moved forward, and Dudley followed her. A few moments later saw him standing before Miss Bellasis, her card in his hand. He had not found the courage to look at her whilst the introduction was going on, but now he stole a glance at her, to find she was gazing at him rather too attentively. He grew honestly confused.

"I have ventured to put my name down here," he said, indicating the solitary vacancy upon her card.

"Yes?" She held out her hand for the card, and leisurely read what he had written. "Do you know," she said, slowly, "I have rather a curiosity to know your name." She might mean little or nothing by this speech; she might mean a great deal. Dare felt that he was changing color. At this particular moment the waltz then being played came to an abrupt end, as some waltzes will, and after awhile Sir Dudley, offering her his arm, led her away to a conservatory. The next was a square dance, put in to make happy the middle-aged belles, and

Miss Bellasis had declared her disinclination to have anything to do with it.

When in the dimly lit conservatory she sunk upon a lounge, opened her fan in a leisurely fashion, and suddenly turned her eyes full on his.

"I can't explain it," she said, deliberately, "it is the strangest thing—yet I can not help fancying that I have seen you somewhere before."

The arrow went home; but he bore the wound with a courage undaunted.

"The most natural fancy possible," he said; "the Row is open to us all, and when one goes to two or three balls in a night, why—"

"I do not think it was in the Row or at a ball I met you," interrupted she, softly; "though of course," with a presumably backward glance into her memory, "it might have been in the *Row*. However—it wasn't."

"Perhaps," said he, though he knew he was reddening like a wretched school-boy, "you can recollect when it was I was so happy as to come within your notice?"

"If I could remember, surely you could," she said. She leaned toward him. "Have you ever seen *me* before?" she asked, impressively.

"Seen you?" He repeated her question in a stammering fashion, and then stopped short. Somehow he felt as if he could not tell her a lie—as if he could not deny the joy he had gained by his first glance at her. He grew silent, and stood there before her, frowning perplexedly, and most evidently embarrassed.

"Ah! you have," said she.

She moved quickly, and in doing so the lace flounces of her gown were caught and entangled by the prickly leaves of a cactus standing near. She tried to extricate herself from the treacherous grasp, but unsuccessfully. Dudley went hurriedly to the rescue. He bent over her.

"Allow me," he said. The two ordinary words struck an answering chord. When had he last used them? She lifted her head as he set her free, and said quickly:

"Now, I know it!"

He grew rather pale. *Did* she know it? and whence came that strange little gleam that shone in her eyes? She did not say anything more or volunteer any information as to this sudden knowledge that had flowed in upon her, and Dudley, who was now as one sitting on thorns, made up his mind to learn the worst at once. Anything was better than this nervous suspense.

"So you have found it out," he said. "You have discovered either me—or—my double."

"Your double. Certainly not you," she laughed; and reseated herself with all the air of one who is about to tell you a good thing. "Why, it is the most absurd fancy," she said. "And you must really promise not to be offended, but the fact is your sister Mrs. Trevenning—she *is* your sister, isn't she? Well, she has the most eccentric coachman in the world."

"Indeed!" said he. He went down for a moment, and then rose again and struck out boldly. "Is it the eccentric coachman I resemble?"

"Ah! do not be offended at that. You need not. To

tell the truth, it is a marvelous resemblance. But there is quite a little history connected with that coachman, which, if you like, I shall tell you."

He hastened to say it would give him infinite delight to hear anything from her lips; whereupon she ran through a light account of what was already too well known to him.

"Just now," she said as she finished it, "when you said, 'Allow me,' it reminded me of the time when he ran up the steps and took the knocker out of my hand without 'by your leave,' or 'with your leave.' *Trop de zèle* it seemed to me, but he seemed a dangerous person to argue with, so I made no protestation. Surely," smiling, "you are not dangerous, and yet"—reflectively—"both in voice and feature you resemble him. You must not be angry about this, because, as I have already hinted, he was a coachman quite out of the common." Again the clear eyes looked into his. Could it be possible for such sweet orbs to betray malicious amusement?

"Of course I am to be congratulated in that he wasn't the ordinary sort," said he, with an assumption of cheerful indifference that did him credit.

Miss Bellasis leaned back in her chair and played idly with her fan. Was she about to quit the distasteful subject? He racked his brain to try to find something interesting that should help her to this end, but even as he racked it she spoke.

"Do you know," she said innocently, "I think the Trevenning livery is the funniest I know. Who invented it? Whoever it was deserves public recognition. Light-

gray trousers and a claret-colored coat with white facings. Surely it is unique."

"I don't know much about it," said he. "I haven't gone into that sort of thing. But certainly what you say does sound uncommonly queer. You should reason with Mrs. Trevenning on the subject, who, it appears, is rather a friend of yours."

"Quite the dearest. We haven't a secret from each other, she and I."

She looked at him as she said this, and whether his expression amused her it would be impossible to say, but at all events she broke suddenly into a low delicious laugh.

"Isn't it nice to have a friend like that?" she asked.

"I think it would be very nice to have a friend like you."

She passed this over hurriedly.

"After all I don't think I shall speak to Mrs. Trevenning about the livery," said she. "The Trevennings are not new people that they should care what the world says. And besides— Oh! by the bye, there is one other thing about that remarkable coachman I quite forgot to tell you. Another touch of eccentricity. When leaving, he *took off* his hat to me. He didn't touch it, you will understand, he really tried to lift it. But it was too much for him, it resisted his most earnest efforts. Poor man! It suggested itself to me this morning that perhaps he had once been in better circumstances; might have been *almost* a gentleman."

"He might," said Sir Dudley, grimly. He was now in a rage with himself. How on earth had he ever let himself

in for such a miserable sell? To act coachman to his own sisters; there wasn't even the element of romance in it. He might have known he couldn't act the part decently. To take off his hat! What an utter fool he had made of himself!

"I'm sure of it," said Miss Bellasis, warmly. "There was quite a little air in the way he tried to take off that hat. In fact"—she paused and lifted her eyes to his—"I wasn't half surprised enough, when afterward he put out his hand to bid me good-night!"

"What! Oh! I say, I know I didn't go as far as that," cried Sir Dudley, impetuously.

It was all over then. Too late he stopped short. Miss Bellasis rose to her feet.

"You! What have you to do with it?" demanded she.

"Just this"—his glance grew beseeching—"I was that coachman!"

She moved back, as if in horror.

"You!" she said. And then again—"You! And how, sir, is it that I now see you here masquerading in your master's clothes?"

"No, no! They are my own, I assure you," stammered he; whereupon the sternness she would have sustained fled from her, and the pretty eyes gave place to the laughter that was consuming them. For yet a little while she struggled with herself, and then subsided behind her fan.

"You knew it. You knew it all the time," cried he, reproachfully, yet with a sense of extraordinary relief. He drew away with a determined hand the fan she held, and looked accusatively into her lovely, *riante* face.

"Not last night, indeed," exclaimed she; "acquit me of that. But—this morning—"

"Yes. Go on. Who told you then?"

"Captain Carlton. He recognized you as you waited so patiently beneath the duchess's lamps." *Patiently*: she little knew! "And what are you ashamed of, then?" said she: "it was a mere freak after all, and I, for one, owe you a debt of gratitude: I should not have gone to that ball but for you, and—a man has been known to drive his sisters before this."

"But hardly as their servant. However, I was not ashamed of it until—I saw you."

"Oh! what have *I* to do with it?" said she.

But she had the grace to blush as she said it, and for the first time she avoided his eyes.

"Everything. Not only with this absurd episode, but," earnestly, "with my whole life."

It was in effect a proposal, and Miss Bellasis grew very grave.

"We have been here a long time, have we not?" she said, rising slowly, "I am afraid I must ask you to take me back now to my aunt, Lady Bellasis."

"One word," entreated he. "Are you staying with her, with Lady Bellasis? Yes? Then may I call tomorrow?"

"On her? I am sure"—gravely—"auntie will be very pleased to receive you."

"Ah!" said he, "that is something, but it is not enough. Shall I see you? Will *you* be pleased to receive me?"

" You ask a great deal," she said, but she smiled.

" Have you forgotten that this is our first meeting?"

" Our second, rather."

" Is that other to be counted? Well, our second then."

One hand was hanging by her side. He took it and held it gently between both his own. His face as he did this was so earnest that she could not be angry with him.

" Helen," he besought her, " say you will be glad to see me."

" How do you know my name?" She looked surprised and blushed vividly.

" I heard Constance call you so; and having seen you, how could I forget anything that related to you. Helen! Tell me! I may come to-morrow?"

" Yes, come," she answered softly.

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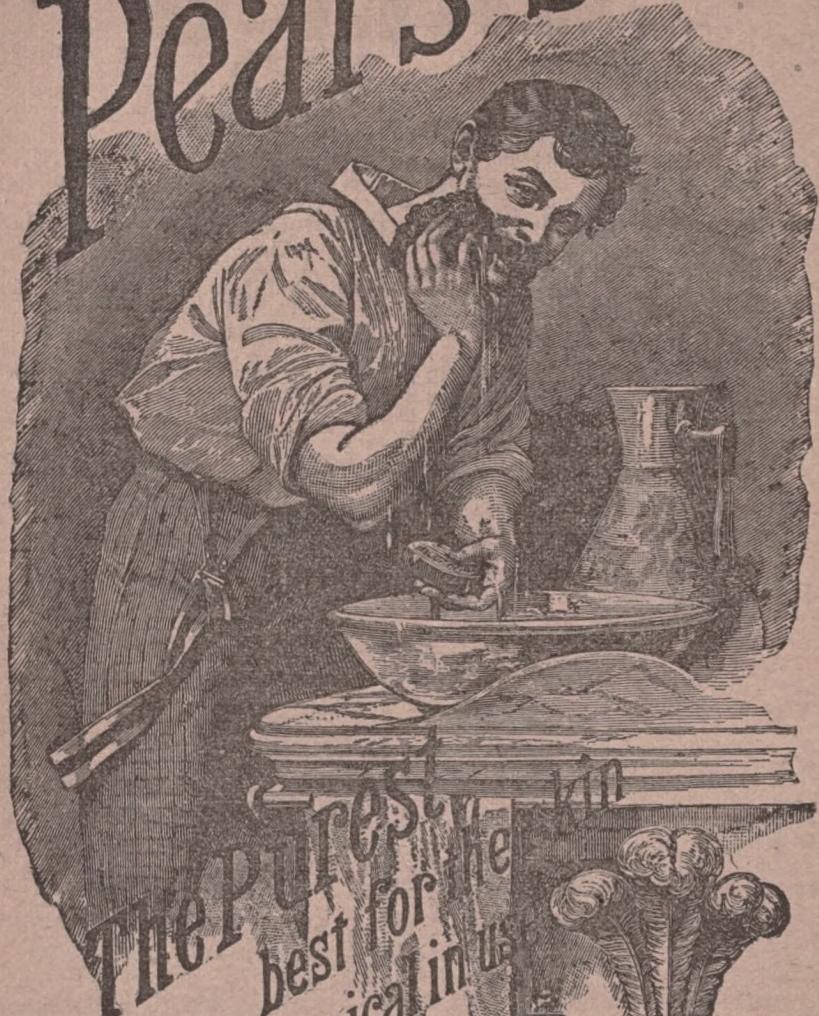
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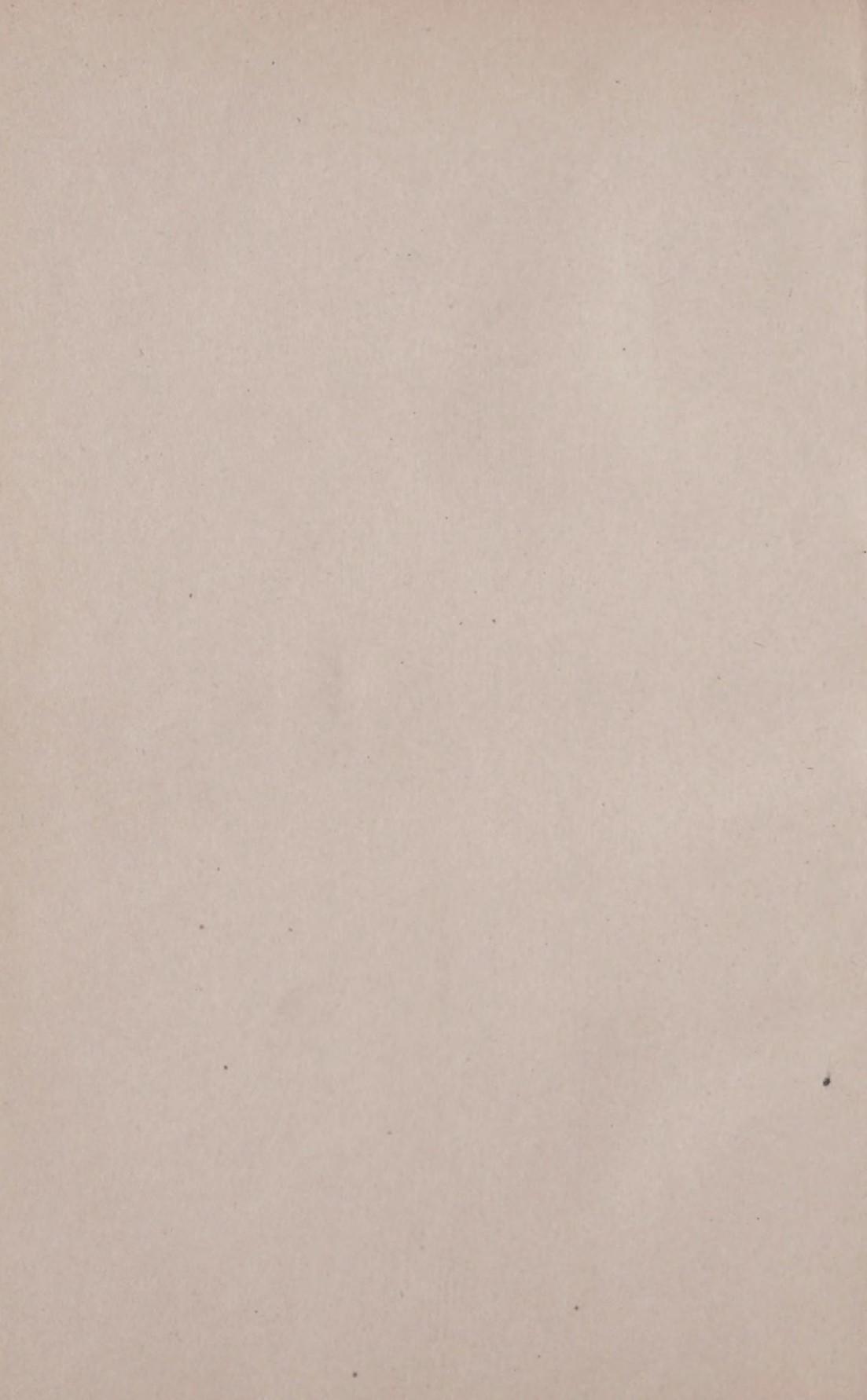
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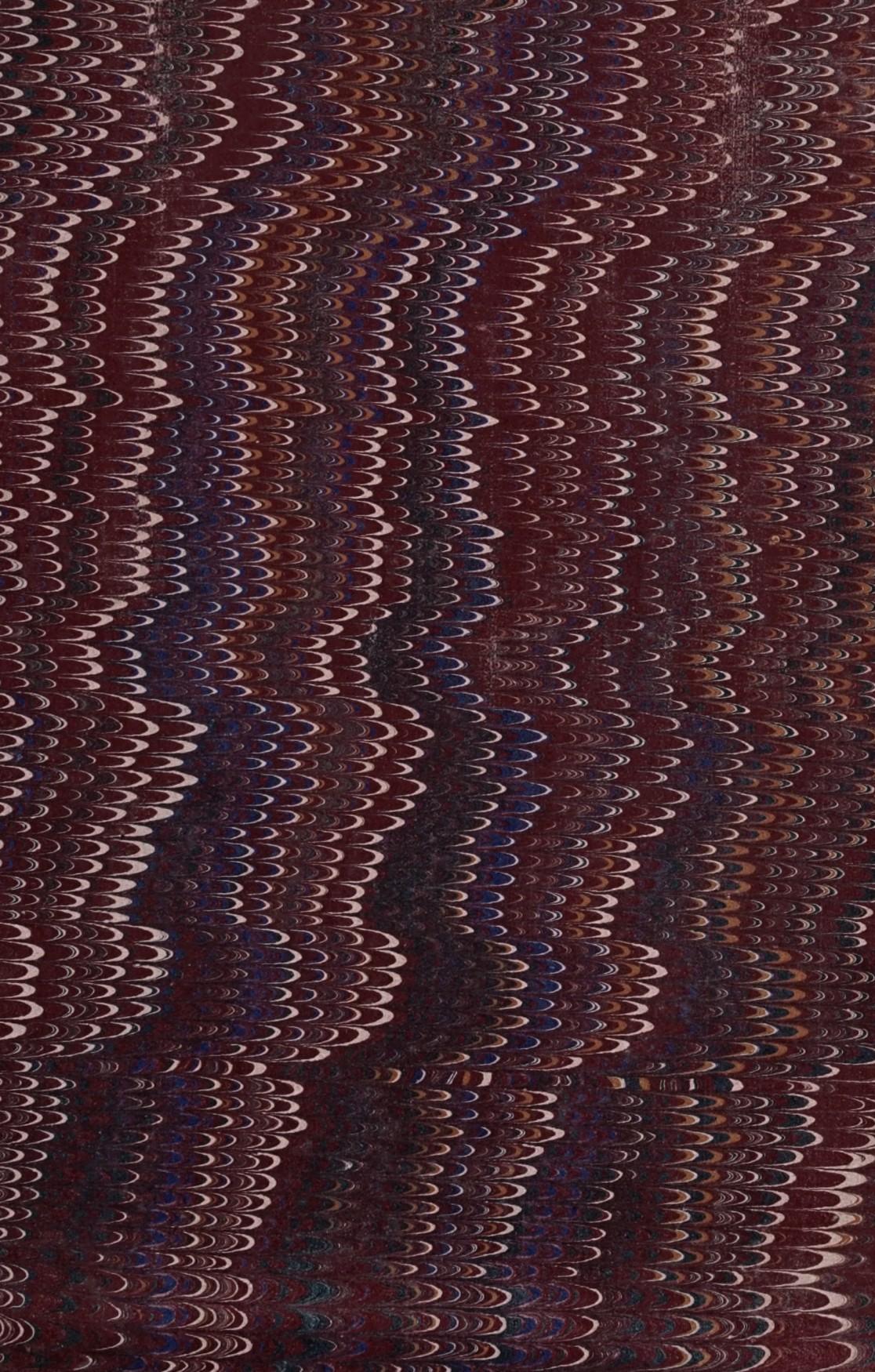
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